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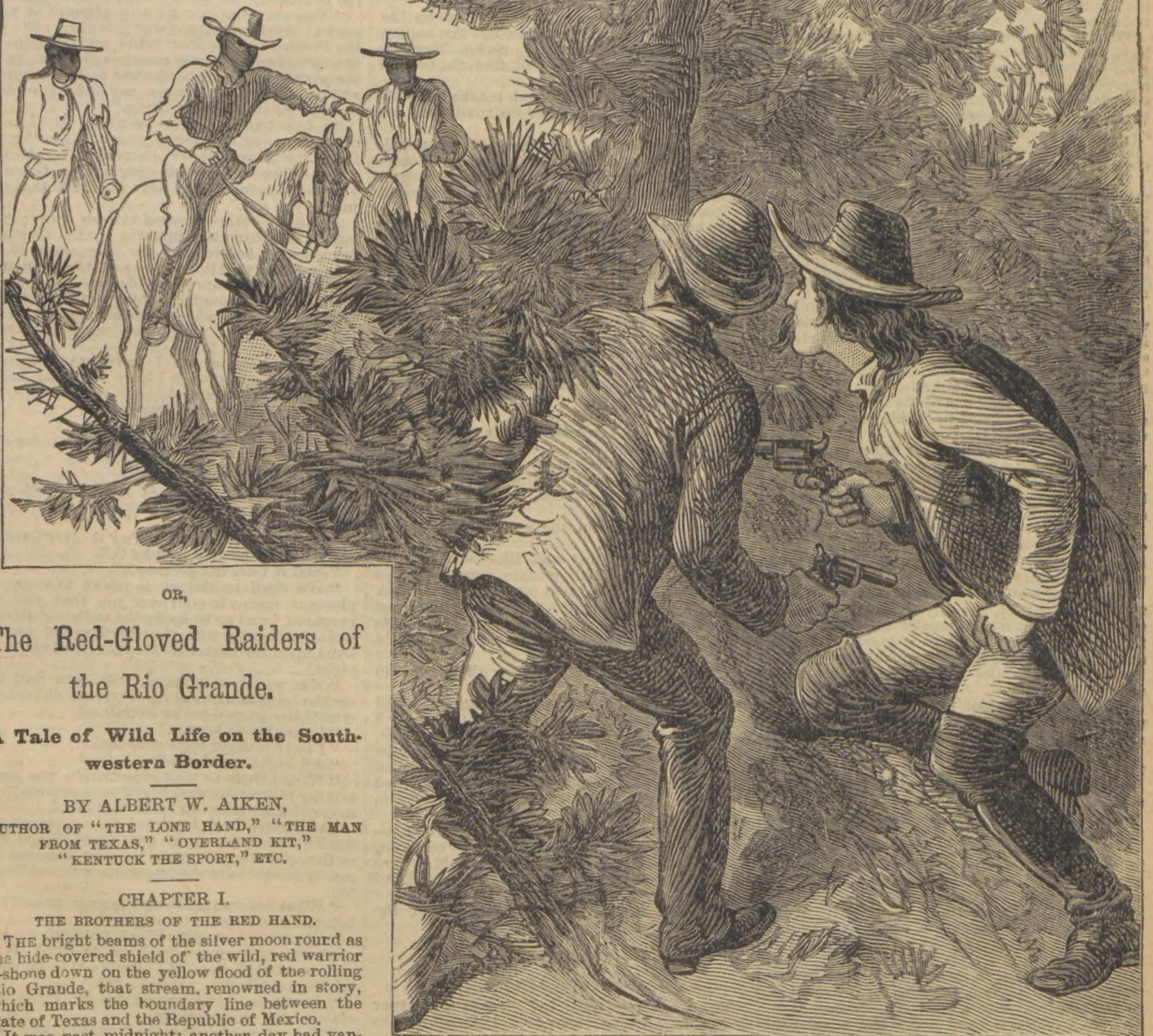
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THE LONE HAND IN TEXAS



OR,

The Red-Gloved Raiders of the Rio Grande.

A Tale of Wild Life on the South-
western Border.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE LONE HAND," "THE MAN
FROM TEXAS," "OVERLAND KIT,"
"KENTUCK THE SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BROTHERS OF THE RED HAND.

THE bright beams of the silver moon round as
the hide-covered shield of the wild, red warrior
—shone down on the yellow flood of the rolling
Rio Grande, that stream, renowned in story,
which marks the boundary line between the
state of Texas and the Republic of Mexico.

It was past midnight; another day had van-
ished into space and a new one born.

All along the river the god of sleep ruled

"YOU TAKE THE RED SKIN AND I WILL ATTEND TO THE OTHER TWO," WAS
LONE HAND'S INJUNCTION.

supreme, with only a few mortals disobedient enough to dispute his power.

And the majority of the mortals who were not enjoying

"Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeves of care," were of nature akin to the beasts who rest by day and work by night.

With the stealthy cat tribe—which embraces the panther, tiger, and lion, all beasts of prey—six horsemen, who rode along the trail by the southeastern bank of Pedro Creek, might with justice claim kindred.

They were men and not animals, yet in their natures they were as ferocious as any wild beasts which had ever, in search of prey roamed through jungle or wood, or over a great prairie's vast wastes.

They were birds of prey in search of plunder! The greenest tenderfoot who had ever trodden Texan soil would have been able to tell this at first glance, for they wore the disguise common to the men who make robbery their trade.

Their faces were hid by black masks, through holes in which their eyes gleamed.

They wore the usual rough dress common to men who dwell on the frontier and spend a good part of their time in the saddle.

Rough woolen pantaloons, big boots, into which the pantaloons were tucked, flannel shirts, and for an outer garment, the first two—they were riding in pairs—wore a blanket coat, and a hunting shirt of buckskin; the second couple wore Mexican jackets, and the two who brought up the rear, were habited, one in a coat rudely-fashioned out of buckskin, and the other sported an odd sort of a garment, which looked more like the pea-jacket so dear to a sailor's heart than anything else.

Upon their heads, one and all wore the broad stiff-brimmed hat of the Mexican—the sombrero, with its gaudy trimmings.

The horsemen were well-armed, for every man carried a pair of revolvers in his belt and a ten-inch bowie knife.

Apart from the black masks there was not anything in particular about the men to excite attention, excepting that each rider wore upon his left hand a glove—and that glove was bright red in color.

This strange circumstance would of course have attracted immediate attention; and then a good judge of horse-flesh, would have detected at a glance that all the men were mounted upon superior animals. Some of them were not particularly prepossessing steeds in looks, but the speed and the endurance were there.

All the men were good riders, and sat their steeds as though they were a part of the animal.

The trail the horsemen were riding led down the southeast bank of Pedro Creek which rises in the foothill of the Pinto mountains in Kinney county, Texas, flowing southerly, with a slight trend to the westward, and runs into the Rio Grande—the "Brave River of the North," as the grandiloquent Spaniards originally termed the stream.

At the time we introduce the party to the notice of the reader they were rapidly approaching the point where the creek joined the river, and, by rising in their saddles, could distinguish the ripples caused by the moonlight on the broad bosom of the Rio Grande.

"I say, cap'n," said one of the foremost riders addressing his companion, "isn't that the Rio Grande over yonder?"

The speaker was tall, rather thin and spoke with a somewhat squeaky voice.

Quite a contrast was he with his angular bony frame to the man he addressed, who was splendidly built and evidently young.

This fellow bestrode his horse with all the ease and grace of an accomplished cavalier, and had a dashy, commanding way like a man used to authority.

He was evidently the leader of the party, this fact was apparent, not only because he rode in the advance, but on account of his appearance, for in this respect he was a good head and shoulders above any of his companions.

"Yes, that is the Rio Grande," the other answered.

"Wal, cap'n, I don't want to appear too pesky curious, but what is our little game to-night?" the bony fellow asked.

"Are you at all acquainted with this country?"

"Not a mite! I have never been as far south as this on the Rio Grande."

"This little stream that we are now following is called Pedro Creek."

"So I heered Yaller say when we first struck it."

"It runs into the Rio Grande, and a little ways below the junction there is a small settlement known as Pedroville."

"I knew there was sich a place, as I heered one of the boys talking 'bout it this afternoon at the camp."

"It isn't much of a town, only twenty-five or thirty houses, but it is destined, in my opinion, to be considerable of a place one of these days, for the location is good and it has a splendid back country to draw upon."

"Nice lot of ranches and plenty of rich stock-raisers, eh?"

"Yes, that is the lay-out, and as Pedroville is the most convenient point to procure supplies, the town is bound to grow."

"But, Cap'n Vermilion, I calculate we ain't much interested in booming towns," the other remarked.

"Very true, but we are some of the men who help the town to boom," the leader answered.

"You are right there, bi-gosh!"

"Oh, yes, and Pedroville can boast of quite a number of citizens who are pretty well fixed."

"Yes, yes, that is the kind of cattle we are interested in," the lanky man observed, with a chuckle.

"Prominent among these well-fixed fellows is one Peter Raymond, usually called Pete Raymond for short," observed the rider, whose companion had addressed him by the strange name of Captain Vermilion.

"Well, this same Pete Raymond is one of the best known men in this section. He keeps a general country store, but that is only a cloak to his real business which is that of a money-lender and usurer."

"That is a mighty profitable business in this section, I should calculate," the bony man remarked.

"Well now, you can bet all you are worth that it is!" the other exclaimed, emphatically.

"This Pete Raymond has been skirmishing along the Rio Grande now for about five years and I reckon he has corraled a good hundred thousand dollars in that time."

The lanky man gave vent to a low whistle, evidently intended to express vast astonishment.

"Wal, wal, he is well fixed and no mistake!"

"Yes, he is just the kind of a man that gentlemen of our kidney like to do business with, for when we come to 'clean him up' he will be apt to pan out rich," observed the leader of the band, using the old mining expression.

"Yes, yes, that is so, but I should calculate that such a man would be rayther difficult for to get at."

"As a rule they are, but in this case our man is not on his guard. It is a remarkable fact that this section has never been troubled by toll-gatherers of our class."

"Bands like our own have operated up the river and down the Rio Grande, but this section has escaped, and for that reason there is not much doubt that we will find the best of pickings."

By this time the riders had reached the Rio Grande and the settlement of Pedroville was before them.

The village consisted of a main street extending along parallel with the river, the houses fronting the stream, and a road running at right angles from the other, the means of access to the back country.

The house of Pete Raymond was situated on the main street in the outskirts of the town; in fact it was the first house encountered in approaching Pedroville from the northward, coming down the Rio Grande trail.

It was a one-story shanty with a store in front and a living apartment in the rear, after the fashion of the frontier.

The house was rather isolated, being a good hundred yards away from the next building and about the same distance from the house on the other side was a small grove of scrub-oaks.

When the band reached the trees the leader gave the signal to halt.

"Now, boys, our game lies before us in yonder ranch," he said. "Dismount!"

And he set the others the example as he spoke.

When they were on the ground the captain gave his commands.

"White, Black, Red and Blue will go with me. You, Yellow, will remain here in charge of the horses. Take them into the grove which will afford concealment, for although it is not likely that any one will be abroad at this late hour, yet still we must be prepared for such a thing."

The outlaws nodded, for they all believed in being on guard.

"I say, captain," said the lanky man who had been examining the house of the usurer, "I hope you will not be offended at my speaking, but it seems to me as if we had a pesky hard nut to crack here. I calculate that this cuss has got both his doors and windows well served with bars, mebbe, and it is not going to be an easy matter to get in."

"Oh, that is all right, White," the chief replied. "We are not going to try to break in, for the old scamp is armed, and would be sure to make it warm for us. Everything is all cut and dried, as you will see anon. Forward!"

With the stealthy steps of the panther the outlaws advanced.

CHAPTER II.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

THE desperado chief led the way to the rear door, and when he came to a halt before the portal he said—speaking low and cautiously:

"Black, put your shoulder to the door, give one vigorous shove and it will yield; then all

enter as soon as possible, and as quietly as you can, with the exception of Red, who will remain outside on the watch."

The outlaws nodded, in order to show that the instructions were understood.

"Go ahead, Black!" commanded the chief.

The outlaw who answered to this name, a big, burly, broad-shouldered fellow, advanced, put his weight against the door, and with one vigorous push forced it open, the stout oaken bar, which was placed across the door, breaking in two as though it was a mere lath.

Within the room a candle burned upon the table, so that the apartment was illuminated.

Peter Raymond, the money-lender, was a rather smallish man, well in years, with a sharp face, ornamented with a mop of iron-gray hair, and a bristle-like beard of the same hue.

He lay upon his bunk, fully dressed, and when the intruders rushed into the apartment and menaced him with their revolvers, awakened by the noise of the intrusion, the money-lender rose to a sitting posture, and gazed with eyes full of curiosity upon his unannounced visitors.

To the surprise of the bandits he did not seem to be either surprised or alarmed.

"Do not attempt to give an alarm or your blood will be upon your own head!" warned the outlaw chief in a hoarse, disguised voice, as he leveled his cocked revolver full at the heart of Raymond.

"My dear sir, you have no cause for uneasiness on that score, I assure you," the money-lender replied in the soft, wheedling way peculiar to him, and which had caused the denizens of Pedroville to affix to him the nickname of Soapy Pete.

"I have not the slightest idea of attempting to give an alarm. I trust I have dwelt long enough on the border to be aware that a man seldom gains anything by being ugly when he is hoaxed with a call of this kind."

The brigands looked at each other.

They had encountered some cool hands in their time but Soapy Pete's composure was marvelous.

"I am glad to see that you are inclined to listen to reason," the outlaw chief remarked.

"You are wise too for any attempt on your part at resistance would cost you dear. We are the Brothers of the Red Hand and though we are merciless when our power is disputed, yet if the parties we visit are disposed to be reasonable and do business in a proper way, there is no difficulty in getting along with us."

"I do not think I have ever had the pleasure of meeting any member of your organization before," the money-lender observed in a reflective way. "Nor can I recall ever having heard of your band before, but I have no doubt that it is just as you say."

Again the outlaws looked at each other; such talk as this from the lips of a victim they had never heard before, and the idea came to the brigand chief that it might be possible the money-lender did not comprehend the object of the nocturnal visit, although the thing seemed absurd.

So the outlaw leader proceeded to explain.

"I presume you understand our little game?" he said.

"Yes, I suppose so. I have heard of such things before, although I have no actual knowledge," the other replied.

"Well, we are tax-gatherers."

"Yes, yes."

"Not for the county or the State but for ourselves."

"Exactly! I comprehend."

"And we have called on you to collect your tax."

"I see."

"If you are prepared to pay it over immediately we will be glad to take it."

"And if I am not prepared?"

"We shall be obliged to resort to some unpleasant means to convince you that you are prepared," and as he spoke the outlaw chief tapped significantly with the forefinger of his left hand upon the barrel of the revolver held in his right.

"Yes, yes, I understand. Oh, you will find me the easiest man in the world to do business with!" the money-lender exclaimed.

"I am glad to hear it."

"I have a slight request to make."

"All right, go ahead."

"Would there be any objection to you and I talking this matter over together in private?" the money-lender asked in his softest tones.

The outlaw chief hesitated for a moment and fixed his keen eyes upon the face of Soapy Pete as though he would read his very soul, but the money-lender bore the inspection without flinching.

"What are you up to—some gum game?" the brigand demanded, abruptly.

"Oh, no, not at all! What put such an idea as that into your head? I am no fool! What chance would I stand if I attempted to play any trick upon you?"

"A chance to be struck by lightning!" exclaimed the other, grimly.

"Yes, of course; that is it exactly, and I am not idiot enough to try any such game. I want to talk this matter over with you, and I have

something to say which had better not be said in the presence of witnesses.

The outlaw chief reflected for a moment upon the matter.

The money-lender had the reputation of being an exceedingly shrewd man—much too shrewd to attempt to play any trick, and so the outlaw leader concluded to grant the request.

So he directed his followers to depart, bidding them wait at the door without until he should summon them.

When the door closed after the last one of the outlaws, Soapy Pete waved his hand toward a chair near the bunk upon which he sat.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," he said. "I reckon we are going to have quite a little talk together and you might as well take it easy."

The intruder sat down.

"You reckoned, I suppose, that this little game to-night was kinder a surprise-party to me?" the money-lender continued.

"Yes, that was my idea."

"And you are after the thousand dollars that Ben Jackman paid me this afternoon?"

"Precisely, I thought I would relieve you of the care of it."

"So, I reckoned. I am not a very sharp man, but I think I can see into a mill-stone as well as the next fellow."

"Jackman was fool enough to go blowing around that he had paid the thousand dollars and got out of my clutches, and I was afraid I would have some visitors to-night, for I had a suspicion that there was a band somewhere in this neighborhood, and when I went to close up to-night and found that the bar of my door had been tampered with, I was sure of it."

"Oh, then you expected a call."

"Yes, and I was prepared for it. Of course I could not tell but what some common rascals were going for me, a pair of the town bums, maybe, and for such vermin I was prepared."

Then Soapy Pete turned down the blanket which covered the bunk and showed a pair of cocked revolvers ready to his hand.

"But when you and your band came in, I saw at once that it was no common gang and so did not attempt to resist."

"A wise decision, for it would have cost you your life!" the outlaw chief declared, with stern emphasis.

"Oh, I could not have hoped to beat off your party, of course. But now that you understand that I was prepared for this visit of yours you will not expect to corral this little thousand."

"You have put it away in a safe place, no doubt," the outlaw remarked, an extremely ugly ring in his voice.

"Oh, yes, I bought a thousand dollars' worth of cattle of Miguel Aldama and paid the cash right down on the nail."

"Do you know, my dear fellow, that we Brothers of the Red Hand have an extremely disagreeable way of dealing with men who play tricks of this kind on us?" the outlaw exclaimed in a threatening way.

"Oh, yes, of course I understand that, but I am not in the least afraid, for I am going to make a proposal to you, and as I feel sure you will be wise enough to accept I do not fear your vengeance."

"A proposal?"

"Yes, I think from my position in this county I can be of a good deal of use to gentlemen in your line of business. I presume you have been operating up the Rio Grande?"

"Right! on the Mexican side."

"And that country got too hot to hold you?"

"Exactly!"

"And now you propose to clean out this section?"

"Yes."

"I presume you have agents on the Mexican side through whom you are able to dispose of the spoil which you gather on the American side of the river?"

"Your surmise is correct."

"Well, I would like to act as your agent on this side. From my intimate acquaintance with this country I think I would be able to get rid of a good deal of the stuff which you collect in Mexico. I don't want to surprise you, but I think I know who you are. I had a suspicion the first time I met you that you were sailing under false colors."

"Just think this matter over for a few moments and see if we cannot make a big thing out of it by working in cahoots."

"I can put you onto many a nice picnic! For instance, what do you say to capturing old Miguel Aldama? You could carry him off to your retreat and hold him for ransom. If the trick was worked right there is twenty thousand dollars in it."

"It is a big scheme!" the outlaw chief remarked, thoughtfully.

"I can work it if you will carry out the plan. But come, what do you say? Do you want me for an agent?"

The outlaw chief accepted the offer. Details in regard to communications were arranged and the interview came to an end.

The Brothers of the Red Hand departed without plunder, but the chief was satisfied that an important gain had been made.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAVELERS.

Down the road from the town of Buckner, heading toward Pedrovilla and the Rio Grande, came a traveler who journeyed as few men journey in that part of the Lone Star State of which we write.

He was on foot, and yet looked not like the vagrant wanderers, commonly termed tramps, who are about the only men who trust to "shank's mare" in the far Southwest.

In person he was a little above the medium height, magnificently built; one of those men who are so well proportioned as to be extremely deceptive, never appearing as large as they really are.

His face was rather long and oval shaped, the features clear-cut, and, to the eyes of an experienced judge, used to reading character in the face, the firm-set mouth and resolute chin would have betrayed that he was a man who possessed an indomitable will.

He came along at an easy, swinging step, and his upright carriage and peculiar way in which he carried himself would seem to indicate that he had seen service in a military way—a man used to command.

From his face—the long, oval face so common to the men of the Southwest—and the fact that he wore his hair long, "clubbed" over his ears, as the odd fashion is termed, the supposition was natural that he was a son of the Southland.

He was dressed, too, after the Southern fashion, wearing high riding-boots, into which a pair of ordinary gray breeches were stuffed, with a blanket coat, so called because made out of a gray blanket, a garment calculated to give excellent service and stand rough usage; and a fawn-colored, broad-brimmed slouch hat completed the costume.

No arms were visible, and yet he was in a wild region where few men cared to travel far from home without being well provided with offensive weapons, for the State of Texas, all along the Rio Grande, is cursed by the presence of as lawless a set of men as can be found anywhere within the borders of the Union.

All the weapon the stranger displayed was a light switch which he had cut from some tree on his road, yet a good judge, from the appearance of the wayfarer, would have been apt to come to the conclusion that, though the soldier-like fellow displayed no weapons, yet he was not only well heeled, but knew how to use his offensive arms.

It was a wild and broken country through which the trail ran; rocks cropped out of the soil every here and there, and although there was no heavy timber, yet there were plenty of scrub oaks, cedars, pines, and other trees of a dwarf nature, growing singly and in little clumps, scattered over the country.

The sun was high in the heavens, showing that it was near the noon hour, when the traveler came to where a little brook crossed the trail.

It was a tiny stream, barely six inches wide, and came from amid a clump of rocks fringed with evergreens, some twenty feet from the road.

"It is near noon, and I am getting hungry," the stranger soliloquized, as he caught sight of the brook.

"This little stream probably comes from a cool spring amid the rocks; just the place, beneath the shelter of the evergreens, to rest for a while."

Acting on this conclusion, the traveler quitted the trail and followed the brook to its head among the rocks.

As he had anticipated, there was a spring there, bubbling up merrily from beneath two huge boulders.

There was a clear space around the spring about ten feet in diameter, then the pines and rocks on the north and west sides closed in.

It was a silvan retreat, fit for the home of a fairy queen, and such was the thought of the traveler as he passed through the evergreens and looked upon the scene.

The little glade was tenanted, though, as the stranger entered it.

Not by the fairies, who, seemingly, were more suited to the spot than were humans, but by a mortal who, seated on the green sward close by the little hollow where the spring bubbled forth, was engaged in dispatching a frugal lunch of crackers and cheese.

The occupant of the little glade was a young man of twenty-four or five, a good-looking, blonde-haired, blue-eyed fellow, although he looked pale and thin, like a man who had just recovered from a severe illness.

He was dressed in a dark-gray suit, which showed signs of long wear, and from his appearance a good judge of mankind would have quickly come to the conclusion that he and ill-fortune had lately been close companions.

A stout stick was lying upon the grass by his side, and he grasped it as the traveler made his appearance so unceremoniously—for the stranger had approached with so catlike a tread over the soft turf that the man within the glade had no suspicion that any one was near until the

other parted the branches of the pines and stepped into the glade.

The traveler had not thus approached with the idea of surprising any one in the spot, for he had no suspicions there was any mortal in the neighborhood but himself, but it was his natural way of walking.

Big and muscular as he was, he stepped with the ease, lightness and grace of a dancing-master.

"Hello, stranger, how are you?" the new-comer explained in a frank and hearty way. "I see you are in possession of the claim, and doing exactly what I calculated to do."

"The moment I spied this brook I jumped to the conclusion that it came from a spring, and that up in the pines I would find a nice place to eat a bit."

The manner of the new-comer at once reassured the other, so the young man dropped his stick, saying:

"You are heartily welcome, sir; there is plenty of room, and I am glad of your company."

"I see that you are on the tramp the same as myself," the new-comer observed, as he advanced and took a seat on the grass on the other side of the spring from where the young man sat.

"Yes, I am on my way to Pedrovilla."

"So am I."

"I shall be glad of your company. My name is Webster—Leonard Webster, and I am from Buckner."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Webster!" and the new-comer shook hands with the young man.

"My name is Hand—L. Hand—and I am a stranger in these parts. I suppose I might describe myself as a speculator, hoofing it through the country with the hope of striking a good streak of luck."

The explanation was reasonable enough, and the young man had no suspicion that the other was anything but what he appeared, but the reader who has chanced to peruse the tale entitled "The Lone Hand, or the Recreants of the Red River," will understand at once that this apparently careless seeker after fortune was the man who figured as the hero of that tale, and was the means of destroying as desperate a band of scoundrels as the State of Texas had ever known.

"Well, I hope you will be successful," the other remarked. "I did pretty well when I first came down here, but for the last three months I have had an awful bad run of luck."

By this time the Lone Hand had produced from one of his pockets a small package of crackers and cheese and proceeded to satisfy his hunger.

"That's bad," the Lone Hand remarked, "I am sorry to hear it."

"As you have probably guessed I am not a native of this State."

"You do not seem like a Texan, neither am I, for that matter, although I have lived so long down in the Southwest that I can easily pass muster as a native."

"Yes, I should have taken you for one."

"No, I am not; but you are from the East, I reckon."

"Yes, from Boston."

"Well, I am doubly glad to meet you then, for I have many warm friends in that city," and again the two men shook hands.

"I have been here just about six months now—came down to grow up with the country, you know, but after the first three months I was unlucky enough to catch a fever and for the last twelve weeks have not been able to do anything."

"That was bad."

"Yes, a man's money soon comes to an end when he is sick among strangers and is obliged to pay a good price for everything he needs, that is unless he has a small fortune at his back."

"And I suppose you were not lucky enough to have that?"

"No, about all the money I had was what I saved out of my salary. I was clerking it in Buckner. When I recovered I found my employer had got another clerk, but he was kind enough to recommend me to a party who has a store at Pedrovilla and I am now on my way there. The position was vacant and if it has not been filled I am all right."

"If it should be filled though it would be a bad outlook for you," the Lone Hand observed, disposing of the last of his lunch.

"Yes, that is true, and do you know that thought has been worrying me ever since I left Buckner," the young man observed, soberly.

"Well, if the clerkship is gone, there will be a chance for you on some of the ranches in the neighborhood, that is if you are strong enough to stand a cowboy's life," the other suggested.

"Yes, that is the trouble; at present I am afraid I could not stand it; I am a fair rider and otherwise am tolerably well qualified for the life; I think too I should like it, with all its hardships, better than clerking, but at present I am afraid I could not stand it."

Just at this point the sound of horses' hoofs fell upon their ears, the steeds approaching at a brisk gallop.

"More travelers, and better fixed for traveling than we are," the Lone Hand observed.

"They are not on the trail but coming down from the hills to the westward," the young man remarked after listening for a moment.

"You are right," the Lone Hand said, having come to the same conclusion. "And that is rather odd. Maybe they are not honest travelers and we had better take to cover. The pines will shelter us!"

The suggestion was acted upon at once; concealed amid the pines they commanded a view of the trail.

CHAPTER IV. THE RIDERS.

"By the way, I don't know but that we are making jacks of ourselves," Webster remarked, after gaining the shelter of the trees. "Here we are hiding away just as if we had committed some crime and were afraid of being apprehended."

"Yes, but that is not the reason why we take to the timber," the Lone Hand replied. "Down in this wild country it is a good deal the same as in the far West; every man you encounter is as likely to turn out to be a foe as a friend, and a man ought to be on his guard."

"True, there are a great many rough fellows in this section, but, as a rule, they are not apt to trouble anybody except when they are in liquor," Webster observed.

"If you should happen to run across a band of raiders you would be certain to change your opinion," the Lone Hand replied, dryly.

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten the possibility of that, and there is a band who have been making things lively in the upper part of this country along the Rio Grande."

"The band headed by a fellow who calls himself Captain Vermilion?"

"Yes, that is the one."

"And all the fellows wear a red glove on the left hand?"

"That is the band."

"I have heard some pretty tough stories in regard to these outlaws," the Lone Hand remarked, reflectively.

"They say they are a rough lot, but I have never heard of them operating in this section."

"Such a gang is on the move all the time, and you never can tell where they will strike. After they have cleaned a district out, or the locality becomes too hot to aid them, they emigrate to fresh fields and pastures new."

"Well, such 'tramps' as you and I haven't much to fear," the young man observed, with a laugh, "for these Red Raiders would not make their fortune out of us."

"With such scoundrels all is fish that comes to their net," the Lone Hand replied. "And, though we are on foot, hoofing it, if we should happen to encounter them, the rascals would undoubtedly strip us of everything of value we possessed, no matter how little we panned out. In fact, if the booty was particularly small, the scoundrels would be apt to abuse us because it was not larger."

"Yes, I have heard of just such cases."

While this conversation had been going on the sound of the horses' hoofs, clattering along the rocky trail, had been growing louder and louder, although the strangers had moderated their pace into a walk.

And just as the last words of the sentence escaped from the lips of the Lone Hand, the horsemen came in sight, emerging from the broken ground of the foot-hills into the open trail.

"It is the Red Raiders, sure enough!" exclaimed Webster, whispering in the ear of his companion.

"Was I not right in advising our seeking shelter here?" the Lone Hand asked, speaking in the same cautious tone.

"Small as may be the amount of valuables we possess, I reckon that neither you nor I can afford to lose them."

"You are right there, for I should be completely crippled; I have not a friend in this section upon whom I could call for aid."

"Well, I am a stranger here too—don't know a soul."

By this time the horsemen had approached so near that the pair suspended their conversation for fear of being overheard.

As the concealed men had said, it was the outlaw gang who called themselves the Red Raiders; the same fellows whom we introduced to the reader's notice in our opening chapter, but this time there were only three in the party, the lanky fellow, who answered to the name of White, and the two attired like Mexicans, "Red" and "Yellow."

As we stated, the three had pulled their steeds into a walk after striking the trail, and when they came in front of the clump of pines, where the two travelers were concealed, they halted, so the watchers had an opportunity to fully inspect them.

The three were dressed exactly the same as when we first introduced them to the reader's notice.

The masks upon their faces concealed their features so that even if either of the watchers had seen them before they could not recognize them.

"This air is the spot, boys, I calculate," White remarked as he pulled up his horse at the place where the brook crossed the trail, and looked around him.

"Yes, here is the brook," Red remarked in a thick, guttural voice, and the moment he spoke the Lone Hand whispered in the ear of Webster:

"That fellow is a red-skin, or a half-breed."

"Yes, look at the color of his hands."

"Yes, yes, this is the spot!" exclaimed the third horseman, Yellow, speaking with such a peculiar accent that both of the concealed men jumped to the same conclusion in regard to his nationality.

"He's a Mexican," whispered Webster.

"Oh, yes, a Greaser undoubtedly."

"And a pesky nice place it is too for our picnic!" exclaimed White, looking around with an approving nod.

"It could not be better," said the half-breed.

"Caramba! we will do the trick up in fine style."

"Hello, hello, they are here on business," murmured the Lone Hand to his companion.

"So it seems."

White, who was evidently acting as the chief of the party, drew forth a magnificent gold watch and consulted it. The spoil of some raid.

"Twenty minutes past twelve," he said, "and the party was to be here about half-past, so we have ten minutes to find a hiding-place."

Then all three looked carefully around, and the watchers felt a little nervous as the keen eyes of the marauders were directed at the clump of pines which gave them shelter.

This feeling increased when the Mexican raised his hand and, pointing directly at the pines, said:

"How would that bunch of timber yonder do?"

The gaze of all three of the Red Raiders was now fixed intently upon the evergreens, and the travelers felt decidedly uneasy.

The Lone Hand produced a pair of revolvers, which he wore belted to his waist, and, despite the danger of the proceeding, whispered to his companion:

"Are you armed?"

"No bigger weapon than a penknife. I had a pair of revolvers, but was forced to part with them to raise money to pay the bills incurred by my illness," Webster answered.

"Take one of these weapons, then; it is a self-cocker, and as good a tool as ever a man handled," the Lone Hand explained.

"There are only three of the scoundrels, and we ought to be able to drop two of them at the first fire! You take the red-skin and I will attend to the other two," was Lone Hand's injunction.

"All right; but do you think we are justified in opening fire upon them without warning?" the young man asked.

"Perfectly justified!" the Lone Hand replied. "These fellows belong to the most bloody and remorseless band of outlaws who have ever been known along the whole line of the Rio Grande."

"If they should happen to get us in their power, and thought we were at all in their way, they would murder us in cold blood without the slightest compunction."

"If your conscience troubles you, though, about the matter, and you do not like to take them unawares, we will rise and bid them beware, if they make up their minds to come this way."

"Well, I think I would feel easier in my mind," Webster admitted. "I do not doubt that all you say is true, and that the men richly deserve to die, but hang me if I want to be their executioner."

"All right; but, don't let us move unless we are forced to it."

During this conversation the leader of the three had been intently examining the surroundings.

"No, boys, I calculate that pine clump ain't jest what we want," he remarked, after completing his survey; "it is a leetle far from the trail, and then them rocks in the rear will be in the way. This bunch of oaks seems to me to be a heap sight better."

And he pointed to a clump of scrub oaks, on the east side of the trail.

"That's no rocks there to be in the way of our hosses, and when our game comes along we kin pop out and treat 'em to the biggest kind of a surprise-party."

"I reckon you are right," the half-breed said, and the Mexican also nodded his head in approval.

"Ob, you bet I am!" the lanky man exclaimed.

"And now, boys, you have got this thing down all fine, hain't you? You understand jest how the game is going to be worked? Flourish your weapons all you like, you know, but don't use them, for neither one of the pair will be able to use their barkers."

"The weapons are fixed, eh?" inquired the half-breed.

"Yes, nary fire kin be got out of them," the leader answered.

"Our trick is to capture the game without harming the birds."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the others.

"We are playing the ransom act this time and so we must not hurt the birds who are to lay golden eggs for us."

"It is a big scheme!" the half-breed observed.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Mexican. "It takes our captain to get up games of this kind."

"Oh, he has got a head on his shoulders; there is no mistake about that!" White remarked.

"Now for ambush, boys, and be sure not to move until you get the signal from me."

"Oh, that is all right," the half-breed replied, confidently. "I reckon that Yellow and a man about my size are old hounds at this business and we have both taken tricks long before you ever thought of putting up a job."

"All right! mebbe you have; we won't dispute about it, but we want to use uncommon care this time for we are playing for a stake worth fifteen or twenty thousand dollars."

Then the bandits left the trail and concealed themselves behind the clump of oaks.

CHAPTER V. THE CAPTURE.

THE outlaws were at such a distance now that the travelers felt free to converse without fear, pitching their conversation in low tones, though, so that their was no danger of alarming the bandits in ambush.

"Well, what do you think of these fellows now?" the Lone Hand asked.

"I have often heard of these bandits who haunt the line of the Rio Grande, but I always thought the accounts were exaggerated."

"In my opinion it is hardly possible to exaggerate in giving an account of the evil deeds of these outlaws."

"A more bloody, remorseless set of villains the sun never shone on than these bandits of the Rio Grande, and, knowing the fellows as I do, was the reason why I was willing to mete out to them the same treatment which they give to their victims. If gold is to be got they will shed blood as freely as though it was worth no more than water; therefore when it came to springing a surprise on them, I had few scruples against it."

"I believe you are right," Webster remarked in a tone of conviction. "I presume there isn't any doubt that if they had discovered us it would have been either our blood or theirs."

"Yes, these fellows would have done their best to wipe us out, so as to prevent us from interfering in this little game that they have on foot."

"I confess I do not exactly understand what they are up to, although I overheard every word of the conversation," the young man remarked.

"Why, they are laying in ambush for a certain party—two in number, I should judge—whom they intend to capture, and by means of some confederates at the place where these two have come from, their weapons have been tampered with so that when the outlaws make their attack, their prey will not be able to offer any resistance to amount to anything."

"Yes, I understand that; but what is their idea of capturing this party? That is something new, isn't it? I thought the way these bandits worked the trick was to stop their man, or men, secure all the valuables, and then decamp."

"These outlaws are playing a bigger game than that," the Lone Hand explained. "That is the ordinary road-agent business, but this gang have got a new idea; they are going to play the game which has been a favorite one with the Italian brigands ever since the dark ages."

"They are going to capture a man and hold him for ransom."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Didn't you hear the scoundrel, who is apparently the leader of the three, say that there was fifteen or twenty thousand dollars in the job?"

"Yes, I understand now."

"They are laying in wait for some wealthy rancher; they will make a prisoner of that man and carry him off to their retreat in the mountains. Then they will have him send a message to his friends that he is in the hands of the marauders and will be set at liberty upon the payment of so much money."

"Suppose either he or his friends are stubborn and will not pay the sum?"

"Then they follow the example of the Italian brigands and proceed to put their victim to the torture."

"To the torture?" exclaimed Webster, in horror.

"Yes, take off a part of his ear or one of his fingers and send it to the captive's friends with a threat that if the money is not forthcoming they will proceed to further extremities."

"Horrible, horrible!"

"Yes, you are right; I could almost make your hair stand on end with tales of the ferocious deeds of these Rio Grande outlaws, and from the sample I have seen of these Red Glove Raiders, I suspect reports have not done them any injustice, when rumor gives out that they

are one of the worst bands that have ever been known along the Rio Grande."

Webster was silent for a moment, deep in thought, and then he said, abruptly:

"Mr. Hand, can we not play a part in this affair, this picnic, as these scoundrels term it?"

"I reckon we can," the Lone Hand replied, in his quiet way.

"We can rescue the man, or men, whom they intend to capture," Webster declared.

"You bet! and we will do it too. This fellow spoke of a surprise party, and evidently thinks the springing of this trap upon the victims will be a good joke; he will be apt to laugh on the other side of his mouth though when we introduce our surprise party to him."

"Yes, that is true."

"Well, we must arrange our programme," the Lone Hand remarked. "For when the time for action comes we shall have to move quickly. I suppose it will be best to allow these fellows to go ahead with their game—make their capture, before we attempt to interfere."

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, as I presume I have had more experience at this sort of thing than you, I suppose I had better be the one to give the signal for the advance."

"Oh, certainly, you must take command!" Webster exclaimed. "I will be content with the role of a high private."

"By the way," said the Lone Hand as a sudden idea occurred to him, "I never thought of it before, but is it wise in you to get mixed up in this thing?"

"I fear I do not exactly understand you," the other remarked.

"It is probable that you are not thoroughly acquainted with the manner in which these outlaw bands are organized and run."

"That is a fact; I am not well posted."

"As a rule a band is composed of two sections; one, the outlaws who do the plundering, the other, men who have their abode in the towns and act as spies, giving warning to the marauders when there are any attempts made to capture them, and also looking out for opportunities for the outlaws to do a good stroke of business."

"It is the story of the old world brigands over again," the young man observed.

"Exactly; these modern robbers have taken a leaf from the past."

"Well, what I was hinting at is, considering that these fellows have allies in the towns—possibly right in Pedrovilla where you intend to take up your abode—will it be wise for you to antagonize the scoundrels? These bandits have long arms, you know, and they strike hard when they strike."

"But you do not appear to be troubled by this consideration," Webster remarked.

"Oh, well, I am a kind of an adventurer, anyway, used to hard knocks, and all that sort of thing, and a few enemies more or less doesn't matter," the Lone Hand replied, carelessly, but with no trace of boasting in his speech.

"I am not anxious to make enemies, of course," the other remarked. "But in a case like this, a man, who is anything of a man, cannot hesitate. I am not any braver or more disposed to rush into a quarrel than the majority of mankind, but under such circumstances as these I cannot refrain from taking a part in the affair, even though I do so at the risk of life."

"All right, you and I are pards then and we will see if we cannot astonish the weak nerves of these Red Glove Riders. Lay low until I give the word. You take the red fellow and I will attend to the other two."

"Drop your man, if you can, at the first fire, so that he will not have any chance to do any fighting."

"I will do the best I can."

"Well, mortal man can do no more," and then as he finished his speech the Lone Hand held up his finger to warn his companion to silence and bent forward his head to listen.

Webster also pricked up his ears.

The acute hearing of the Lone Hand did not deceive him.

Horses were approaching on the trail from the north.

"It is the game the outlaws seek, I reckon," the Lone Hand remarked.

"In a few moments the fuss will begin. Don't forget that the revolver is a self-cocker, and that a single pull fires the charge, and, if you are not used to double-acting weapons, bear in mind that nine men out of ten in using a self-cocker will be apt in the excitement of the moment to move the pistol a trifle to the right, thus destroying the accuracy of the shot; bear this in mind and aim a little to the left of where you wish to strike."

"All right, I will remember," Webster replied, his cheeks flushed with excitement and his eyes sparkling.

Quite a contrast to the Lone Hand, who was as cool as though fighting brigands was an everyday occurrence with him.

The sound of the horses' hoofs came nearer and nearer, and soon the horsemen themselves came in sight.

There were two of them, an elderly, gray-bearded gentleman and a young, dashing-looking

fellow, both handsomely dressed, and from the style of both themselves and their steeds it was apparent that they were well-to-do.

They were coming along at a brisk gallop until the young man caught sight of the brook, rippling across the trail, and then he cried out to his companion to pull up for a moment so he could get a drink.

And as the horses came to a walk, having arrived at a point right in front of the clump of evergreens in which the two were hidden, out from their ambush rode the outlaws.

With leveled revolvers they rushed upon the strangers, who, abruptly, pulled their horses to a stand-still.

"Throw up your hands, or you are dead men!" the bandit chief cried.

For answer the travelers pulled their revolvers from the holsters and essayed to fire upon the outlaws, but although the hammers fell and the cylinders clinked around, the weapons were not discharged.

"Oho!" cried the outlaw leader, "it isn't of any use for you to try that game! Your tools have been doctored; our pards have fixed that all right! Down with your weapons or we will drill holes right through you!"

Satisfied that they could not beat off the attack, the horsemen threw down their pistols.

"Now, then, it is time for us to put in an appearance!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, in the ear of his companion.

"Don't forget that the red fellow is your man!"

CHAPTER VI.

A SURPRISE.

OUT from the shelter of the evergreens came the pair, and the moment they emerged from the pines they opened fire.

The Lone Hand shot with the precision of a man in a pistol-gallery, but the young Bostonian was nervous and excited.

The adventurer, as he had termed himself, chose the lanky man for a target, and he tumbled the marauder from his horse with a well-aimed shot.

Webster's aim was not as true, for his bullet went wide of the man at whom it was aimed, striking the horse in the head, but as it happened, the result was fortunate, for the shot brought instant death to the beast.

The brute pitched down upon his knees, the shock—so entirely unexpected—throwing the rider over his head, bringing him to the ground with such tremendous force as to knock all the sense out of him.

The third outlaw was panic-stricken by this unexpected attack, and his horse, frightened by the discharge of the firearms, bolted in wild terror.

The rider did not attempt to restrain him, but allowed the horse to gallop away at the top of his speed, and the outlaw quickly disappeared amid the broken country up the trail.

The victory was won, and with very little trouble.

The rescued men were fully as astonished as the outlaws at the unexpected rescue, and gave vent to their surprise in joyful exclamations.

"Bravo!" cried the old, gray-bearded gentleman: "that was nobly done!"

"Upon my word, sir, you came most timely to our relief!" the other exclaimed.

"Yes; the rascals had you foul," the Lone Hand observed: "and if we had not happened to be in the neighborhood, I reckon it would have cost you some money to get out of the scrape. But a miss is as good as a mile, you know."

"Yes; but I would rather be excused from taking part in any more affairs of this kind," the old gentleman remarked.

"I don't blame you; the experience is not pleasant," the Lone Hand observed.

A groan from the lanky man at this moment attracted his attention, and he advanced toward him, addressing the young Bostonian as he did so.

"Pard, just take a look at the red-skin, and, while you are about it, take charge of his weapons, for he may be inclined to be ugly when he recovers his senses."

"I will look out for him!" the young man on horseback exclaimed, dismounting as he spoke.

"Don't trouble yourself," the Lone Hand replied, immediately.

"He is my pard's meat, and he will attend to him. Take his weapons away and bind his hands with this lariat."

The keen eyes of the Lone Hand had noticed that there was a lariat coiled on the horn of the saddle, from which his bullet had so unceremoniously dismounted the leader of the outlaws.

The lanky man's beast, evidently more used to firearms than the fiery steed of the Mexican, had not attempted to run away when relieved of his burden, but remained near the spot where his master had fallen, quietly cropping the grass by the wayside.

And as the Lone Hand spoke he stepped to the side of the horse, removed the lariat, and with a bowie-knife, which he drew from under the skirt of his coat, cut the stout cord in twain.

He gave half of it to Webster, who immediately proceeded to carry out the orders which had been given.

While the Bostonian was occupied in his task, the Lone Hand approached the wounded man.

"Well, stranger, how do you feel?" he asked.

"Mighty bad. I reckon I am plugged for keeps," responded the other.

"Oh, no, I guess it isn't as bad as all that, unless I made some mistake about the matter. I did not intend to wipe you out, for if I had I should have plugged you in another place. It was my game to disable, not to kill you. I do not doubt that you richly deserve to die, but I did not feel called upon to act as your executioner, so I merely put a ball in your shoulder instead of driving it through your heart, which I might have done as well as not."

This seemed a little like boasting, but there was nothing of the braggart in the Lone Hand's manner.

"Let us see what you look like, anyway," the latter continued, stooping and removing the mask from the countenance of the wounded outlaw as he spoke.

A thin, angular, hatchet-like face was revealed, lit up by shifting, gray-green eyes, full of low cunning.

It was much more like the face of a petty shop-keeper than that of a bold and murderous bandit.

The old gentleman and the young man peered earnestly at the countenance, when the mask was removed, as though they expected they would be able to recognize the man.

It was to afford them an opportunity so to do that made the Lone Hand remove the disguise the bandit wore.

He had no thought of being able to recognize the fellow himself, as he was a stranger in the neighborhood.

Neither of the horsemen knew the man either, for after getting a good look at his face the old gentleman remarked:

"He is a stranger to me—does not belong in this neighborhood, eh, Mcreno?"

"Oh, no, I never saw the fellow before," the young man replied.

"I do not live in these parts," the outlaw said in a sulky way, as though he resented the inspection.

"I am a stranger, and hard up, or else I should not have tried this little game. I was led into it anyhow by that feller that dusted so lively without trying for to make a fight."

"Ah, you were, eh?" the Lone Hand responded. "And I suppose this gentleman yonder who had his senses knocked out of him by the fall of his horse is another innocent party?"

By this time the half-breed's wits had returned to him and he sat up, staring around as if he did not exactly know what to make of it.

"Yes, that durned galoot talked both of us into it," the lanky man replied.

"Take off his mask so we can see what he looks like," the Lone Hand commanded.

Webster removed the mask.

The man was a half-breed as the pards had suspected, a dull, brutal-looking fellow, and he glared at his conquerors with eyes full of rage.

"Do you know him, gentlemen?" the Lone Hand asked.

The horsemen shook their heads.

"Another stranger, eh?"

"Yes, he does not belong in this section," the old gentleman answered.

"Oh, they are both strangers, sure enough," the young man observed. "Mr. Aldama here is an old resident and he would know them if they were not strangers."

"It is jest as I tell you, pard," the lanky man declared, endeavoring to assume an appearance of great frankness. "I met this here galoot this morning as I was hoofing it along the road, and we had a little chin together. He was broke, like I was, and we made up our minds to strike a ranch for to see if we couldn't get a job; jest then 'long came that durned Greaser with his hosses, and he talked us into this job."

"Where's your captain?" demanded the Lone Hand, abruptly.

"Hey?" and the lanky man put on a stupid look.

"Where is your captain, I say?" exclaimed the other, sternly. "Don't you try any monkey business with me. You know what I mean well enough!"

"That Mexican cuss is the man you mean, I s'pose?" the conquered outlaw responded, sullenly.

"Oh, no, I mean the fellow who calls himself Captain Vermilion, the chief of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

The horsemen looked astonished and the outlaws scowled.

"Do you know of any such band?" the Lone Hand continued, addressing the elderly gentleman, who had been called Aldama by his companion.

"No, I do not. No such band has ever operated in this neighborhood."

"They are new-comers then; I had an idea that they were," the adventurer observed.

"But you will be apt to hear enough of them within the next month."

"Do you notice the red glove upon the left hands of these fellows?"

The others nodded.

"That is the badge of the gang—that is where they get their name, the Red Glove Raiders."

"Tain't so!" the lanky man declared. "These here red gloves are jest some monkey business of that cussed Greaser!"

"Oh, come now! there isn't the least bit of use of your attempting to lie out of it!" the Lone Hand exclaimed in contempt.

"Myself and pard here overheard the whole of the talk between you and your pals when you were making preparations for this attack."

"You two gentlemen are the victims of a deep-laid plot," the Lone Hand continued, greatly to the astonishment of the horsemen.

"There were only three men detailed to attack you because it was arranged beforehand to tamper with your weapons so you would not be able to make a fight. If you examine your revolvers you will find that they are of no more use to you than so many sticks."

"Ah, that accounts for our not being able to fire the weapons!" Aldama remarked as he proceeded to test the truth of the statement.

"It is so, by heavens!" he exclaimed in a moment.

"The cartridges have all been doctored!"

"Exactly! a regular trap laid, and the idea was to carry you off and keep you a prisoner until a heavy ransom was paid."

"I have heard of such things," the old gentleman remarked, soberly. "But nothing of the kind was ever done in this section."

"Yes, and now that these fellows are secured we will be able to make such an example of them that they will not be apt to try anything of the kind again in this neighborhood," the young man declared.

An announcement that tended to make the outlaws appear decidedly uneasy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TOWN IS AMAZED.

THE pair exchanged glances and then the lanky man cried out.

"You are all barking up the wrong tree, I tell you! I don't know nothing 'bout no Red Glove Band, and this fool business was the Greaser's say-so. He fetched the gloves out of his pocket and said we had better wear them 'cos it would kinder frighten our game. Mebbe he war one of this here band that you tell about but we don't know nothing about it, hey, pard?" and he nodded to the half-breed.

"No, we don't know nuffin' 'bout it," the other declared.

"Oh, you are a pair of innocent ducks, beyond a doubt!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, sarcastically. "But I don't take any stock in your yarn for I know better. You are both members of this outlaw band and if you are wise you will make a clean breast of it."

"I have told you the truth and if you ain't willing to believe it I can't help it," the discomfited ruffian replied.

"It is a most mysterious affair," the old gentleman, Aldama, observed at this point. "How on earth the scoundrels managed to get at our weapons so as to render them useless is a puzzle. Can you see how it was done, Moreno?" he asked addressing the young man.

"Upon my word I cannot, I have been racking my brains to account for it," the other replied.

"My revolver has not been out of my possession, I am sure of that, since we left Pedroville, and I was careful to put fresh charges in it just before we started on our journey, so I know it was all right then."

"That was exactly what I did," the old gentleman observed. "And that is why I am so perplexed in regard to the matter."

"I have it!" exclaimed the other, abruptly.

The scoundrels must have got at our weapons while we were asleep at the hotel last night!"

"Yes, yes, I never thought of that," the old gentleman remarked.

"No doubt that was the way the trick was done."

"To be sure! And as I had put my revolver in order before I started I did not take the trouble to examine it to-day."

"Neither did I, for I had not the slightest suspicion that there was any mischief afoot," Aldama remarked.

"Wal, all I have got to say is that I didn't have no hand in the job!" the lanky man exclaimed.

"You kin jest blame it onto that durned Greaser for he was the cuss that did it!"

"Yes, yes!" chimed in the half-breed.

"You will have a chance to tell your story in a court-room pretty soon, and maybe the judge who presides over the trial will take more stock in it than I do," the Lone Hand remarked, significantly.

"All I ax is a fair show for my money!" the outlaw responded, doggedly.

"That you will have most assuredly in Pedroville," the old gentleman exclaimed.

"There is no squarer man in Texas than our

mayor, Jack Hamilton, and as your case will be brought before him you can depend upon getting justice."

"That is all I want, for I know I kin clear myself of this outlaw band business," the wounded man observed, with an attempt to appear very dignified.

"I don't put in no claim to be any better than I ought to be," he continued, "and I am ready to own up that I am in the hardest kind of luck and 'bout ready to turn my hand to anything."

"Save your talk until you come to trial," the Lone Hand advised. "I haven't no doubt the mayor will give you every chance in the world to prove that you are not as big a rascal as I take you to be."

The outlaw scowled at these plain words, and the lanky man remarked:

"Oh, I calculate we won't git much show. It will be the old story, I s'pose, give a dog a bad name and hang him."

"Now, don't you worry," the old gentleman observed. "You will have the fairest kind of a trial, for Jack Hamilton is not the man to strike a fellow when he is down. But, I say, sir," and he addressed the Lone Hand, "how are we going to get this fellow to Pedroville? I do not think he is in a condition to ride."

"Ride! blazes, no!" White exclaimed, with a groan of pain, as though it was wrung from him by the very thought.

"If you galoots are anxious to send me head-long into my grave, you want to put me on a hoss and I calculate you will fetch it!"

"Oh, I reckon you are not so badly wounded as all that," the Lone Hand remarked, proceeded to examine the outlaw.

The fellow groaned with pain every time that the other touched him, and although the adventurer did not believe the man was half as badly hurt as he pretended, yet, as he had lost considerable blood, he thought it was possible he might not be able to bear the journey.

"It will be the dead of me if ye try any sich games as that!" the man protested. "You might jest as well put a rope 'round my neck and string me up to one of these here trees, as to try to carry me to Pedroville on a hoss. I calculate I am done for anyway, and you ought to let me die in peace."

"Suppose you go on to the town with the other fellow, and I will remain here and keep watch of this man," Moreno suggested. "When you arrive at Pedroville you can send a wagon to bring this prisoner."

"Yes, yes, that is a good idea!" Aldama exclaimed.

The Lone Hand shook his head in a doubtful way.

"There is only one objection as far as I see," he remarked.

"What is that?" Moreno inquired.

"If this man is a member of the outlaw band who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande, as I firmly believe, the Mexican who fled will be certain to warn his companions, and they will be apt to return if they are in the neighborhood, and it is likely that they are not far off, for the purpose of rescuing their comrades."

"I tell you that thar ain't no sich band as I knows on," the wounded man protested. "And this Red Glove business was all a fool idee of that darned Greaser!"

"Oh, I am not a bit afraid but what I can hold my own!" Moreno declared. "I have a box of cartridges in my pocket, and with my revolver in order, I can stand off a half-dozen outlaws, for such fellows only fight bravely when all the advantages are on their side," and then he proceeded to remove the worthless cartridges and put fresh ones in their places.

"Pedroville is only fifteen minutes' ride," the old gentleman remarked, "and within half an hour we can return with the wagon."

"I calculate I will pass in my checks afore that time," the wounded man muttered, and then he groaned in a dismal way and closed his eyes as though about to faint.

"All right!" the Lone Hand replied. "I do not see any other way to do it, so it will have to answer."

"Let us be off as soon as possible so as to get back before this rascal's pards can come to his assistance."

The half-breed was assisted to his feet and then helped to mount the lanky man's horse.

"You had better take my beast," Moreno said, to the Lone Hand. "He is a stout brute, and will easily carry both you and your friend, as the distance is a short one."

"Much obliged," the adventurer responded, and then he vaulted into the saddle with ease and bestrode the steed in a manner which showed him to be an expert rider.

The Bostonian got up behind.

The Lone Hand addressed a few warning words to the half-breed before they started.

"Don't try any foolishness," he said. "There is no chance for you to escape, for upon the first indication of any such thing I will drive a ball right through you."

The half-breed glared in sullen rage, but he spoke not.

In his heart he was satisfied that his captor

would not hesitate to do exactly as he said, if he was provoked to it.

On went the party at a brisk pace, leaving Moreno to guard the wounded man.

In fifteen minutes Pedroville was reached.

Only a few remarks were made during the journey.

When the distance was about two-thirds covered and the town appeared in sight, the Lone Hand shook his head, and said:

"I am afraid we have made a big mistake in leaving only one man to guard that wounded scoundrel."

"Oh, I think not," Aldama replied.

"I am afraid that when we return we will not find either guard or prisoner."

"Of course it is possible, but I do not think it is probable," the old gentleman observed.

The people of Pedroville were amazed when the cavalcade entered the town.

As it happened, there was a group of the leading men of the town standing in front of the post-office, which was located in the principal store of the village, quite an extensive establishment, which bore on its sign the name, Moses Oppenheim.

There was the mayor of the town, Jack Hamilton, a big, brawny, brown-bearded gentleman, one of the leading cattlemen of the district, Ben Jackman, the town marshal, a broad-shouldered fellow, with long, light locks and a scrubby beard of the same hue, rather undersized in stature, the sort of man who suggests the description of being as broad as he is long.

Jacob Plunkett, the landlord of the hotel, which was dignified by the high-sounding title of the Rio Grande Arms, but which was but little more than a drinking-saloon, although it had a few rooms for the accommodation of travelers; the bar though was the main support of the hotel—was in the group, conversing with the old Jew storekeeper, Oppenheim, who wore the typical Hebrew nose, beard and all, and Doc Alec Mortimer, the proprietor of the "shebang" known as the "Big Texas Sandbank," which was a gaming-hell and saloon combined.

A half-dozen other prominent men were on the street, and take them for all in all, the group was a truly representative one of the citizens of the town.

And loud were the exclamations of amazement which escaped from them when the cavalcade rode into the town.

CHAPTER VIII.

MORENO'S STORY.

"HELLO! hello!" the mayor exclaimed, "what on earth does this mean?"

"It looks as if Aldama had been having a skirmish," the landlord remarked.

"Yes; and he has captured a prisoner, too!" the marshal observed. "Don't you see that that dark-skinned fellow, who looks like a half-breed, has got his hands tied?"

"Mine gootness!" the Jew shopkeeper cried, who always spoke with an accent, for he was a German Jew by birth; "dot mans carries mid him der look of a fearful villains!"

"But where is Moreno?" Doc Mortimer inquired. "He started with Aldama, and now he is among the missing. I hope nothing has happened to him, for that gentle youth skinned me out of fifty dollars at poker a couple of nights ago, and he promised to give me my revenge when he got back from this trip."

The party rode directly up and came to a halt in front of the post-office.

"We have work on hand for you, Mr. Mayor and marshal," the old gentleman remarked, as he reined in his steed.

"So it would seem from the looks of things," the mayor answered, bestowing a scrutinizing glance upon the half-breed and racking his memory to recall whether he had ever met the fellow before or not.

"Yes; as Moreno and I came to where the brook crosses the trail, about two miles out, three masked men went for us, and through some hocus-pocus, which has puzzled me considerably, both of our revolvers had been tampered with so that we couldn't make any fight, and, undoubtedly, we would have been taken into camp if these two gentlemen had not happened to be in the neighborhood," and the old gentleman bowed to the pards, who had dismounted by this time.

"They went for the ruffians in a way that astonished them. This gentleman"—and he bowed to the adventurer—"and that reminds me that I do not know your name. Mine is Miguel Aldama, at your service."

"My name is Hand—L. Hand," the other replied. "And this gentleman"—he laid his hand on the Bostonian's shoulder as he spoke—"is called Webster—Leonard Webster."

"Glad to know you both, gentlemen," the rancher responded, with all the courtly grace of the old Spanish race from which he came.

"Well, fellow-citizens, Mr. Hand dropped one of the road-agents with a bullet in the shoulder. Mr. Webster shot the horse of the second man through the brain, and as the beast pitched down upon his knees, he threw the rider over his head, and that laid him out; the third

man did not attempt to show fight, but fled as fast as his horse's legs could carry him.

"This dusky gentleman is the man who was disabled by being thrown from his steed, and the wounded fellow we were compelled to leave on the field of battle, in charge of Moreno, as he was too badly hurt to be moved on horseback."

"Well, by Jove! Aldama, you have had an adventure!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Yes, and I am lucky to have escaped so well," the old gentleman replied. "And now, Mr. Mayor, I would suggest that you send a wagon to bring this wounded ruffian and Moreno to town as soon as possible, for Mr. Hand here has an idea that these men belong to an outlaw band who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande—you notice the red glove that this prisoner has on his left hand?"

Every neck and eye in the crowd was strained to see this peculiar badge.

"I have heard of such a band operating on the upper Rio Grande," the mayor remarked, "but I never knew them to put in an appearance in this neighborhood, and then, too, I was never really satisfied that there was any such band, for there's a good many smart chaps who think it is funny to get up yarns of this red-glove outlaw band style, and start them on their travels just to fool people."

"I reckon there isn't any doubt about the existence of this band, although both of these men whom we have captured deny it stoutly enough," the Lone Hand remarked.

"The red glove on the hand of this copper-colored galoot would seem to prove it," the marshal observed.

"There is great need of haste in regard to the wagon, I think," the Lone Hand remarked. "For if we do not secure our man quickly, we may be too late, for his companions will be certain to come to his assistance the moment they learn of his peril."

"Moreno volunteered to stay and beat the gang off if they came," Aldama explained. "But if the outlaws come in force, they will be apt to lay our young friend out."

"Yes, yes, we'll have the wagon start right away!" the mayor exclaimed.

Then, calling to one of his men who was in the group, Jack Hamilton bade him harness a team of horses to a wagon as soon as possible.

The man started at a run, followed by a couple more of the bystanders, eager to be of assistance.

As the mayor's house was only a hundred yards down the street, with the corral in the rear, it did not take the men long to get the "outfit" ready.

Meanwhile the half-breed had been committed to the care of the marshal, and was by him lugged off to the calaboose.

Pedroville was enterprising enough to possess a "cooler," wherein big chiefs who came to the metropolis, in little, with the idea of running the town, could be imprisoned until they were cured of their warlike ideas.

Of course, as was only natural under the circumstances, all the citizens wanted to go in the wagon, but the mayor put his foot down and said it could not be.

"Get your own wagons if you are so anxious to go!" he exclaimed. "This is business, and not fun."

So only the mayor, marshal, Aldama and the Bostonian went in the wagon, the Lone Hand using the steed of Moreno; and no sooner did the crowd discover that there was no chance for them to be conveyed in the official wagon, than they scattered, each man intent upon getting some means to reach the scene of action.

This talk had taken time, and as the Lone Hand galloped along in the rear of the wagon, he had grave doubts in regard to their finding the wounded man.

"Instead of a half an hour, it will be nearer an hour before we reach the spot," he soliloquized. "And if the band are in the neighborhood, they will have ample time to come to the assistance of their comrade."

"They will be certain to get there before we will, for we wasted fully a quarter of an hour in talking with the fellows before we started for the town, and as the Mexican was off like a shot, mounted on an excellent horse, too, to judge from the speed he displayed, the chances are a hundred to one that we will be too late."

"This young man, whom the other called Moreno, is a dashing fellow enough, and looks as if he was made of good stuff," the Lone Hand continued, "but I doubt if he is good enough to whip a half a dozen such men as the red glove outlaws are in single fight."

The odds are too great, and he would be almost certain to get the worst of it."

As the reader will perceive from these reflections, the Lone Hand had little hope of finding the prisoner where he had been left.

So he was not disappointed when the party arrived at the brook and discovered that the outlaw was gone.

Moreno was there, though, tied to a tree, blindfolded, and presenting a most woebegone appearance.

"I reckon we are a leetle late," the mayor remarked, as the wagon came near enough to

afford its inmates a view of the scene, and they caught sight of the young man tied so helplessly to the tree.

The Lone Hand galloped on ahead of the wagons upon beholding the plight of Moreno, reined in his horse by the tree, dismounted, and, with a few slashes of his bowie knife, released the young man, and at the same time removed the bandage from his eyes.

Moreno, upon being released, was so weak that he could not stand, and was forced to sit down upon a bowlder which cropped out of the earth near the tree.

The party in the wagon looked at Moreno in amazement, and then they glanced around as much as to ask what had become of the prisoner.

"It is as I feared it would be," the Lone Hand remarked. "We are too late. The outlaws were warned by the Mexican that one of the band was in danger and they hurried immediately to his rescue."

"Yes, I begin to believe that you are right in regard to these outlaws," Aldama remarked.

"And from this time forth it will behoove us all to keep a good lookout."

"How do you feel, Moreno?" the mayor asked.

"Very badly, the scoundrels nearly strangled me," the young man answered.

"How did it happen?" the Lone Hand asked, noticing that the other had been stripped of his weapons.

"I was taken by surprise," Moreno replied. "After you departed the prisoner seemed to grow weak and faint. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him and he said no; he reckoned he was not long for this world."

"I tried to cheer the man up as well as I was able, but really I thought he was almost right."

"After a while he sunk into a stupor and I took a seat on this rock to wait your return."

"I had my revolver out and was keeping a careful watch so as to be able to take to cover if the outlaws came."

"Time passed on and I did not hear a sound that there were any humans besides myself and the wounded man in the neighborhood."

"Then, all of a sudden, without the least warning, the noose of a lasso fell around my neck and I was violent jerked backward."

"In falling I struck my head and the blow stunned me. When I recovered my senses I was tied to a tree blindfolded, just as you found me, and the prisoner, I see, is gone," the young man added, as he looked upon the spot where the wounded man had lain.

CHAPTER IX.

PREPARING A TRAP.

THE listeners gazed at each other when the tale was finished and the mayor and marshal shook their heads in the gravest manner.

"I reckon this hyer is about the toughest crowd that ever struck this district, the mayor observed.

"Yes, it is a 'way-up gang and no mistake!" the marshal declared.

"I had my doubts in regard to leaving the fellow with only one man to look out for him," the Lone Hand said. "I had a suspicion that the gang would return to rescue him as soon as they learned how he was situated. Then, too, I think the rascal was playing 'possum. I do not believe he was hurt half as badly as he made out."

"Well, gentlemen, I can tell you it was a rough deal on me," Moreno remarked.

"I hadn't the least idea that there was a soul in the neighborhood until I felt the noose of the lasso tightening around my neck, and then it was too late for me to do anything, for I was choked into insensibility almost immediately."

"A desperate gang now, I tell you!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Yes, and a mighty cunning one too," the marshal added. "For that lasso business was as cute a trick as I ever heered of."

"You have no idea then how many there were in the party that attacked you?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Not the slightest!" Moreno answered. "It maybe there was only one man, but I think there were more, for a single man would hardly have been able to tie me to the tree."

"That is so!" the mayor exclaimed. "It would not be an easy job for one man."

"Almost impossible!" the marshal added.

"No doubt there was a party of them," said the Lone Hand.

"But I don't believe there were many of them," Moreno remarked, "for if there were they would have made an open dash at me instead of lassoing me from the rear."

"Oh, no, I don't think that follows," the adventurer replied.

"It was the game of these fellows not to allow you to make a fight. Then too by the way they worked the trick they kept you in ignorance of their personal appearance, so you would not be able to give any account of them. That was an important point, of course."

The rest all nodded assent, for the matter seemed perfectly clear to them.

By this time Moreno had recovered his strength and rose to his feet.

"Well, I feel something like myself again,"

he said. "But I tell you, gentlemen, I reckon I have had a narrow squeeze for my life, for if you had not come for half an hour later, I think I would have been done for."

"Darn me if this don't beat anything I ever heard of!" the mayor declared, emphatically. "And I tell you what it is, gentlemen, we must take measures to go for these scoundrels before they have a chance to commit any more outrages."

"Yes, we must make the neighborhood of Pedroville too hot to hold them!" the marshal exclaimed.

"We have got one big point to work on, gentlemen," he continued. "We have got one of the gang safe enough—that copper-colored cuss, locked up in the calaboose, and I reckon if we put the screws on him right sharp we will be able to make him tell all he knows about the band."

"That is a mighty good idea, Jackman," the mayor declared, approvingly. "I reckon your head is screwed on right."

"Wa-al, I allers had that reputation," the marshal replied, grinning.

"Ab, yes, no doubt you ought to be able to force the man to reveal all he knows," the old gentleman remarked, "but he was extremely obstinate when we tried to make him confess after we had captured him—both he and his wounded companion; neither one would admit that they belonged to an outlaw band."

"Oh, of course, such galoots are allers on the deny!" the marshal exclaimed. "But you see you didn't work the trick the way I reckon to do it. You can't do anything with such chaps without you are able to put the screws onto them."

"Of course I know the game I am going to play and just according to law, but down in this yere country, and in such a case as this, we can't stick right close to the rules, you know. We have got to have a leetle leeway."

"That's so," the mayor remarked.

"Well, I hope you will be able to do the trick," the Lone Hand observed. "But from what I have seen of the fellow I reckon you will have a tough job."

"Oh, I reckon that is so; these half-breeds are allers cussed obstinate, but you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I will fetch him to his milk afore I am through with him!" the marshal exclaimed in the most confident manner.

The Arkansian saw that it would only be a waste of time to talk with Jackman, for he was one of those pig-headed men of extremely moderate abilities who had such a great idea of his own smartness that he was not usually inclined to pay attention to suggestions from anybody.

"Well, I suppose we may as well get back to town," the mayor suggested, "for there isn't any use of wasting time byer."

"Yes, let us get back as soon as we kin, for I am anxious to put that red nigger through a course of sprouts," the marshal declared.

The Lone Hand offered the horse to Moreno, but that gentleman declined, saying that he was still too weak to trust himself on horseback and that he would prefer to go in the wagon.

So it was arranged in this way.

On the road to the town the Lone Hand meditated over the situation.

He took no stock—as the saying is—in the scheme of the marshal.

"That half-breed has all the dogged stubbornness of the Indian race from whence he draws half his blood, and, unless I am greatly mistaken in him, would rather die than betray his comrades; not that he is more faithful than the majority of men, but more obstinate. He will not betray the secrets confided to his care because he will not gratify his captors by so doing."

"It is a thousand to one that he will not speak, no matter what is done to him. He will argue that it is not probable that he will be killed and so he will pretend that he knows nothing."

"Now then, since the outlaws came so promptly to the rescue of their wounded pard, is it not probable that they will be apt to do their best to get the half-breed out of the hole into which he has fallen?"

The adventurer reflected over this question for a moment and then murmured.

"Yes, yes, there isn't any doubt of it. That will be their game and I must scheme to meet it. Let me think over the matter."

And the Lone Hand was deep in thought all the rest of the way to town.

During the ride the mayor and marshal had settled upon the programme.

Immediately upon their arrival in the town they were to go to the calaboose and endeavor to force the half-breed into a confession.

"You jest let me alone to skeer the durned copper-colored cuss into spitting out all he knows!" the marshal declared in the most confident manner.

"I will jest wade in to make him believe he is booked for kingdom come if he don't make a clean breast of it!"

"I reckon, Ben, you kin do the trick if any man kin!" the mayor remarked; like many another simple, honest man he was impressed by the

boasting of the marshal and believed him to be far smarter than he really was."

"This feller hyer thinks he knows a thing or two," the marshal remarked, indicating the Lone Hand, riding in the rear of the mayor, by jerking his thumb over his shoulder, "but he wants to be mixed up in this yere frontier life for a few years and git some leetle experience as the marshal of a town, like I have, and then he will be able to say something when he opens his mouth."

The mayor, Moreno, and Aldama nodded assent, all impressed by the booster, but in Webster's eyes shone an incredulous look.

He had not been long in Texas, but during his brief sojourn in the State he had met quite a number of men whose loud boasts were never verified by deeds, and he had a suspicion that the Marshal of Pedrovilla was one of this kind.

When the party reached the town they proceeded straight to the calaboose.

The citizens were on the alert to know how the expedition had made out, and in fact quite a number of mounted men were encountered on the road before Pedrovilla was reached, hastening to the scene of the encounter, anxious to behold the wounded bandit.

Great was the disappointment of the townsmen when they learned that the outlaw had succeeded in escaping, and soon the story of how Moreno had been treated was the common property of the town.

The mayor and marshal had come to the conclusion that it would be best for the two men who had been attacked by the outlaws, Aldama and Moreno, as well as the pair who had rescued them, the Lone Hand and the Bostonian, to be present at the interview, so all the party entered the calaboose together.

The jail was a strongly-built one-story shanty, situated in the southern outskirts of the town.

Within, it was divided into two apartments; a small outer one which served as an office and living room for the jailer, and a large inner room, where the prisoners were confined.

When the party reached the calaboose, the jailer was sitting on the front step smoking a pipe.

Bill Kellogg was his name, but as he was a gaunt six-footer, rail-like in thinness, he was seldom called anything but "Slab" Kellogg.

"How's yer man, Slab?" the mayor asked, as he alighted from the wagon.

"As quiet as a lamb," the jailer answered.

"Them half-breeds are pretty easy cusses to git along with, anyway, unless they happen to git full up to the muzzle with bug-juice an' then they are mighty sart'in for to wade in fer to make things howl."

"Well, we are jest going in for to have a little talk with him," the mayor remarked.

"I am sorry that I can't invite you all in, feller-citizens," he continued to the crowd gathered around the door, "but the hull business would be upstot if I did. If anything important comes out, I will let you know."

And then the party entered the calaboose and the door was closed in the face of the citizens.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNSATISFACTORY EXAMINATION.

The calaboose was scantily furnished; all there was in the room was a couple of stools and a pile of buffalo-ropes upon the floor which served for a bed.

When the jailer found that all six of the men intended to visit the prisoner he suggested carrying in a long bench, which was in the outer apartment, so that they all could be accommodated.

This was done. The mayor and marshal took possession of the stools, the rest sat on the bench, while Slab Kellogg stood in the doorway, having swung the door open so that the party might have light enough to enable them to see what they were about.

The prison part of the calaboose had been built after the fashion of a strong room.

The only window it possessed was a small one about two feet square which was placed high up in the wall—right against the roof—which divided the calaboose into two apartments.

And this window, which was merely a hole cut in the wall, was guarded by stout bars, although from the fact that it looked into the outer apartment instead of into the street there did not seem to be much danger that any prisoner confined in the calaboose could succeed in escaping through it.

The half-breed was lying curled up like a dog on the buffalo-ropes when the party entered the room, and he did not move or evince any signs of life.

The lariat which had bound his wrists had been removed and a pair of handcuffs substituted.

"I reckon the cuss is asleep," the mayor remarked, after he had taken his seat upon the stool. "He don't seem to know we are hyer."

"Oh, yes he does; them half-breeds are like cats," the marshal said, "they allers sleep with an eye and an ear open."

"Hello, you copper-colored galoot, brace up and have some style about you!" Jack Hamilton exclaimed.

Being thus addressed, the half-breed slowly rose to a sitting posture and gazed with a stolid face upon the visitors.

"Shall I question him, Mister Mayor, or will you sail in?" the marshal asked.

"I reckon you kin put the thing through in good shape, and arter you are done if I think of any points I will try my hand," the official replied.

"All right, I reckon I kin git at what we want!" the marshal remarked in the most confident manner.

The Lone Hand was watching the face of the half-breed intently and though not a muscle of his countenance changed—his face being as stolid as that of a wooden image—yet the keen eyes of the Arkansian, who for the past ten years had figured in the role of a man-hunter, fancied he detected a peculiar light in the orbs of the dusky-faced outlaw—a gleam of defiance—and the thought arose in the mind of the Lone Hand that the boasting Marshal of Pedrovilla had a harder task before him than he anticipated.

"Now then, Johnny, I want you to understand right at the beginning that I am a man who won't have no monkeying business!" the marshal exclaimed, shaking his finger impressively in the face of the half-breed.

The fellow simply stared with his dull, heavy eyes, and from his face one would never have been led to believe that he took the slightest interest in the proceedings.

"Jest you chalk that fact down in yer memory book," the marshal continued. "Jest you hold right onto it—don't you let go of it, and we will get on furst rate, I reckon."

"Now, then to start the thing right—what is your name?"

"Joe."

"Joe, eh?"

"Yes, that is my handle."

The half-breed spoke fair English but with a decidedly foreign accent.

"Waal, Joe what? Joe ain't all of it, I reckon."

"Comanche Joe."

"Oho, do you belong to that tribe?"

"No, father a Mexican."

"Ah, yes, I see. Wal, now, Comanche Joe, I s'pose you know you have got yourself into a pretty bad fix."

"Yes, too much bug-juice," responded the half-breed.

"Why, what has that got to do with it?"

"If Joe had not been filled up with bug-juice he no fool enough to try to climb white men."

"Oh, that is the way you are going to get out of it, eh?" the marshal exclaimed. "But I say that game is a leetle too thin. You ain't any more under the influence of liquor than I am."

"No, not now—sleep it off," the other replied.

"That is a likely story, but we will let it go though, for it is neither hyer nor thar."

"What we want to git at is about this outlaw band."

The half-breed shook his head.

"Do you mean to say that you don't know anything about it?" demanded the marshal, angrily.

"Me don't know," responded the man in the most indifferent manner.

"Look a hyer!" cried the marshal, doubling up his fist and shaking it in the face of the prisoner in an extremely menacing way, "do you remember what I said to you right in the beginning about monkey business? Wal now, I mean it—every word of it, and you kin bet all you have got in the world on it too!"

"You don't want to git me riled if you know what is good for yourself. I am a bad man from 'way back when I git started. You want to comb my hair the right way or else the chances are that the fur will fly."

"Comanche Joe no barber!" the half-breed exclaimed with great dignity.

The mayor's risibles were excited by this answer and he gave utterance to a hearty, haw-haw!

"I say, Ben, you mustn't come any flourishes with this coon!" he declared.

"You must talk good, plain United States to him or else he won't know what you are getting at."

"Oh, I reckon he knows well enough," the marshal rejoined, his anger excited.

"He is trying to play it on me, that is all. I have run across just such galoots before, and I tell you thar wasn't one of them who was not sorry that he tried to ring in any monkey business on me before he got through."

And fierce was the look that the marshal bent upon the half-breed as he finished the speech.

Comanche Joe though did not appear to be in the least affected either by the words or the menacing looks, and the Lone Hand laughed in his sleeve at the failure of the bragging official.

In the opinion of the Arkansian the marshal was only wasting time.

The half-breed could neither be coaxed nor forced into a confession, and Jackman might as well save his breath.

But the Texan marshal was a dull, obstinate fellow, full of confidence in his own shrewdness,

and though he was smart enough to understand now that he had got hold of a tough customer, yet he thought he would be able to frighten him into a confession.

"Now then, Mister Comanche Joe, I warned you before, and I warn you ag'in, that I am not the kind of man to stand any funny business and if you know when you are well off you won't try any on me."

"I want the truth out of you in regard to this outlaw gang and I am going to have it too, so you might as well make a clean breast of it furst as last; you will save a heap of trouble by doing it, I tell you!"

"Me don't know," and the half-breed leaned back in the corner, resting his head against the wall as though he had an idea of going to sleep.

The mayor shook his head.

"I say, Ben, this galoot is a hard case," he muttered in the ear of the marshal.

"You bet," the other replied, sulkily. "I would like to take him outside and use up a raw-hide on his back. I reckon I would make him spit out what he knows."

"Say!" he cried aloud, again addressing the half-breed, "I want you to understand that you ain't fooling me for a cent. I know that you are a member of this gang and that you kin tell all about them if you choose to!"

"No, no, me don't know," the prisoner replied, speaking as carelessly as though he took no interest whatever in the matter.

"You don't belong to this outlaw gang who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande?"

"No, me don't know nuffin' 'bout them."

"How did it happen then that you had a red glove on your left hand?"

"The Mexican who got me drunk told me to wear it."

"What for?"

"Me don't know. He said put it on—I did what he say."

"Oh, bosh!" the marshal exclaimed, impatiently, "that yarn is altogether too thin. I reckon I will have to treat you to a hempen necktie, and then, mebbe, when you fell the rope around your neck you will come to the conclusion that you had better spit out what you know."

"Comanche Joe no 'fraid—bring your rope," responded the half-breed, contemptuously.

"Ah, yes, you durned copper-colored rascal you talk that way because you think you ain't in any danger!" cried Jackman, shaking his clinch fist excitedly at the prisoner.

"I reckon though that you will sing another tune when you make the diskivery that we ain't blowing but are in for solid business, every time!"

"Big talk no scare Comanche Joe!" the other retorted.

The mayor thought it wise to say a few words at this point.

"Don't you make any mistake, Joe," Jack Hamilton said.

"As the marshal hyer says, we mean business, and if we can't git the truth out of you in one way, then we will be apt to try another. We have got you foul, and unless you do just as we want you too, we will have to make an example of you, so as to show this gang to whom you belong that it will not be healthy for them to remain in the neighborhood of Pedrovilla."

"Comanche Joe can't tell what he don't know," the half-breed replied.

"Waal, thar's no use of wasting time with you!" the mayor exclaimed, rising.

The rest followed his example.

"You durned red nigger, I will make you sorry for this before you are a day older!" the marshal declared.

Then the party filed into the outer apartment, and the prisoner was again left to solitude.

CHAPTER XI.

A CONSULTATION.

The jailer returned the bench to the outer apartment before closing the door on the prisoner, and also brought out one of the stools, for, as he explained, by tipping the bench up on end, or by putting one stool upon the other, it would be possible for the prisoner to reach the window, and, as Kellogg said, the fellow was so ugly, there was no telling what game he might be up to.

"Waal, gentlemen, I reckon we have got hold of a pretty tough case hyer," the mayor observed.

"You kin bet yer life on that!" the marshal declared. "But I tell you what it is, I reckon you will find all these half-breeds about alike. They are as obstinate as mules, and the only way you kin do anything with them is to put the gad on jest as sharp as you kin."

"Yes, yes, you can't argue with such cattle," Moreno remarked.

"That has been my experience with these half-breeds," Aldama coincided.

"Gentlemen, I reckon we had better adjourn to my office whar we will have a chance to talk this matter over, and come to a decision as to the best course of action," the mayor observed.

The rest nodded their heads, and then the party proceeded to the office of the official.

Hamilton's house was situated in the center of

the town, and he had his office in an ell, built out from the main building.

It was an apartment about twelve by fifteen, plainly fitted up.

There was a desk at the rear end of the room, behind which the mayor usually sat, a smaller one on his right hand for the accommodation of the marshal, who had his office in the same apartment, and a half a dozen common chairs completed the list of the furniture.

There was quite a crowd of citizens outside of the jail when the party emerged from it, and some of them made bold to question the mayor in regard to what had transpired.

"Nothing at all, fellow-citizens, nothing at all," Jack Hamilton replied. "We tried to pump the copper-colored galoot a leetle, but he wouldn't have it; he is as stubborn as a mule."

And then some of the bystanders suggested that it would not be a bad "idee" to introduce the half-breed to a certain distinguished individual known as Judge Lynch.

"Oh, no, gentlemen, we mustn't have any of that work in Pedroville, you know," the mayor responded.

"We are all law-abiding citizens hyer, and ontill the proper authorities fail to make the old thing work thar ain't no need to call Judge Lynch."

The crowd followed after the party to the mayor's office, and Hamilton saw that a number of them had an idea of going in, and although there is an old adage that in a multitude of counselors there is wisdom, yet in this case the mayor thought the presence of a lot of outsiders would not aid matters.

So, on the steps of the office, he made a short speech, telling the crowd that he was going to hold a consultation with the gentlemen who had encountered the outlaws, and that as soon as he came to a decision what course to pursue in regard to capturing the robbers, he would make it public.

The citizens did not admire this arrangement, and there was considerable grumbling, for they thought they ought to be admitted to the consultation, but Hamilton replied firmly that as long as he was mayor of the town he calculated to run matters as he thought best, and that if his actions did not suit the citizens of Pedroville they were at liberty to elect another mayor when his term expired.

So into the office went the party, and the door was closed in the face of the citizens, much to their disgust.

The mayor took his seat behind the desk, the marshal sat on his right hand and the rest arranged themselves in an irregular, half-circle, facing the two.

"Now, gentlemen, I reckon this ar' case is a mighty difficult one," the mayor remarked. "This copper-colored galoot is as stubborn as a mule, and in my opinion we don't stand any show of getting anything out of him by trying to skeer the cuss with threats."

"That is a sure enough fact!" the marshal interjected at this point. "The fellow reckons that we are only trying to skeer him—he don't think we mean what we say when we threaten to make it warm for him if he don't spit out what he knows 'bout these red glove galoots."

"Of course, the cuss is right, thar," Hamilton observed. "He knows we can't take him out and hang him, or flog him within an inch of his life, if he don't answer; we have got to go according to law, and the galoot is calculating on that."

"If Judge Lynch took a hand in the game, mebbe he might find out that he was wrong in his calculation," the marshal remarked.

"That is so, of course," Hamilton assented. "But seeing that we have all the regular machinery of the law, there isn't any call for Judge Lynch."

"Wal, my idee 'bout this matter is that we don't stand no show to git the truth out of this fellow without we go in to skeer him to death," the marshal remarked.

"He is posted, of course, in regard to the law. All we kin do is to turn him over to the sheriff, then it will be three or four months, mebbe, before he is tried, and he reckons thar will be a good show for him to git away, by breaking jail, or something of that kind."

"Yes, yes, that is undoubtedly the fellow's idea," Aldama remarked.

"He is an old hand and knows the ropes," Moreno declared.

"Gentlemen it seems a pity to let the man slip through our fingers in this way," the mayor remarked. "Yet I don't see how we can help it. There is no doubt in my mind that he is a member of a desperate gang, and unless we do something to give them the idea that it will not be healthy for them to fool around this town we will be sure to be pestered by them."

"There is little doubt in regard to that," the Lone Hand remarked at this point. "I know this gang by reputation. They have been operating on the upper Rio Grande for some time, and it is said that they are almost the worst gang that has ever been known along the river. I suppose the country up there has grown too hot to hold them, and so they have come down to this section."

"They are no common marauders but a well-

organized band and work on a regular system. Their design in attacking this gentleman," and he nodded to the old rancher, "was to make him a prisoner, carry him off and hold him for a heavy ransom."

"That is a wise kind of a lay-out!" the mayor exclaimed. "And it seems to me that we ought to do something more than to turn the cuss over to the sheriff. That will not keep the gang from troubling us. My idea is, as I said, to do something to make the rascals think it will be mighty unhealthy for them if they don't quit this section of country."

"Now if we could get this copper-colored scoundrel to make a clean breast of it—to reveal all he knows about the gang, so that we would be posted as to whar they have their hiding-place, which, of course, is up in the hills somewhere, then we could raise a force, wade in and clean the rascals out."

"That is my idea too!" the marshal declared, and all the rest nodded their heads in approval.

"But you see, the whole thing turns upon getting this fellow to tell what he knows," the mayor remarked.

"If he will not peach on his pards then thar is no show for us to work our leetle game."

"That is the pint I have been coming at all the time!" the marshal exclaimed. "And I tell you there is no way to work the trick without calling upon Judge Lynch."

"You heered the talk outside, Mister Mayor! The people are jest ripe for it, I tell you!"

"Yes, but we, as officials of the town, ought not to be mixed up in any such thing," the mayor remarked, reflectively.

"Of course not, and we don't reckon to be mixed up either," the marshal responded with a knowing wink and a prodigious grin.

"The thing will all be done by a lot of men with thar faces kivered so that nobody will know who they ar'."

"They will jest make their appearance, like a lot of ghosts, round midnight. Some galoot will tap on the door of the calaboose and tell Slab Kellogg that they want to speak to him on mighty important business."

"Slab ain't over and above keen, you know, and he will be sure to open the door without any suspicion that everything ain't straight. Then a revolver will be shoved under his nose with the polite intimation that if he goes for to make any trouble, thar will be a vacancy in the position of calaboose-keeper."

"Oh, Slab will come down like Captain Scott's coon when he sees that Judge Lynch is up!" the mayor declared.

"Slab is not fool enough to risk his life or make any trouble on account of any red nigger of a half-breed."

"Then the gang goes in, puts a rope around the neck of mister half-breed and marches him out to the nearest tree."

"He is given two minutes to spit out what he knows about the gang. The chances are that he will be obstinate—think the men who have got him don't mean business, mebbe—he says he don't know noffin', and up he goes; jest gits a good taste of the rope, so as to kinder git an idee of what hanging is like; then he is lowered to the ground and given another chance to confess."

"I have known galoots of this fellow's kind to be so obstinate that they had to be run up three times before they came to their milk," the marshal continued in a reflective sort of way.

"And one or two I kin call to mind who stuck out so long that they were really hanged in good earnest, but they deserved the fate richly enough."

There were a few moments of silence after the marshal finished his explanation, each man apparently debating the matter in his mind.

"Well, gentlemen, it seems to me that this scheme ought to work," the mayor remarked at last. "And I don't really see how else we can get a confession out of the rascal."

"Don't you think it will be best to postpone this operation for a while," the Lone Hand asked. "My idea was that this fellow in the jail would act as a bait to lure his pards into a trap."

"How so?" Hamilton asked.

"Why, the rest of the gang are almost certain to make an attempt to rescue him, and by keeping a good watch with an armed force on the calaboose, the men concealed in the neighborhood of the jail, it might be possible to give the outlaws such a warm reception that they would fight shy of Pedroville in the future."

"Maybe some such scheme might be worked," the mayor remarked.

"Yes, but then thar is no telling that the outlaws will try to git thar pard out of the calaboose," the marshal suggested.

Like the majority of narrow-minded men he was bound to oppose any plan but the one he favored.

"That is true," the mayor admitted.

"They are likely to do so though," the Lone Hand urged. "See how promptly they returned to the rescue of their wounded comrade."

"Certainly they did not allow the grass to grow under their feet," Aldama remarked.

"Yes, but this is surely a different matter,"

Moreno observed. "In the one case it was in the wilderness, in the other it is in the midst of a thickly-settled town. When they returned for the wounded man they were well aware that they would not encounter a large force, but if they try to rescue the half-breed from the calaboose they will run the risk of fighting half the town."

"That is so, sure as ye'r' born!" the marshal exclaimed. "Now, gents, if you will take my advice you will let Judge Lynch put in his work as soon as you kin, and in my opinion the quicker the better."

"It certainly seems to me as if that was the best plan to follow," Jack Hamilton remarked. "And, as you say, the quicker we get at it the better."

"Yes, I should certainly advise that there be no delay, as long as you decide to try the scheme," the Lone Hand said.

"In fact, I would suggest to try it on this very night."

"Yes, that's my idee!" cried the marshal, who thirsted for revenge upon the man who had been deaf to his threats.

"Strike when the iron is hot! That is my motto, allers!"

"But there is hardly time to get everything ready," Moreno suggested. "Would it not be better to say to-morrow night, so that we would have ample opportunity to get ready?"

"Oh, no, thunderation! we kin git everything ready inside of an hour," the marshal declared.

"That is all right."

"Yes, I don't see as it will take long to get ready," the mayor remarked.

"Certainly not. All we need is ten or fifteen good men, well armed, with their faces kivered with masks," the marshal exclaimed. "And a yard or two of black cloth will fix that in no time; and how long will it take to rig a rope with a hangman's noose in one end?"

"Not long, for sure!" Jack Hamilton assented. "I surely think that, as long as you have made up your minds to try this scheme, the quicker it is executed the better," Aldama remarked.

"Yes, for delay might give a chance for the gang to become aware of what was going to be done," the Lone Hand suggested. "And after you got your man out of the calaboose, put the rope round his neck and were going to string him up, it would be unpleasant to have these outlaws make a dash and take the half-breed right out of your hands; possibly, too, lay out a half-dozen of your crowd."

The rest looked at each other in surprise. This was a suggestion which had not occurred to any of them.

"Yes, that would be the roughest kind of a surprise-party on us," the mayor remarked.

"Oh, but it ain't likely that any sich game as that will be played!" the marshal declared.

"It would be the most likely thing in the world, if the gang got a hint in regard to this lynch business," the Lone Hand retorted.

"Just reflect upon the matter and see how easily the trick could be worked. You calculate to have ten or fifteen men; they will be on foot, of course; now, see how easy it would be for a band of mounted men to dash in and snatch your prisoner right out of your hands."

"Wal, I s'pose the game could be worked," the marshal admitted, but with decided reluctance.

"Yes; but it is extremely improbable that any such thing could occur!" Moreno declared.

"How, in the name of all that is possible, are the outlaws to discover anything about the matter?"

"Yes, yes; that's the pint!" cried the marshal, delighted to have a backer.

"We are not going to go about and proclaim from the house-tops that we intend to try a little lynch business on this half-breed."

"Certainly not!" the mayor declared.

"We will keep the matter secret, of course, and only confide it to the men whom we pick out to assist us, so the fact that we are going to have a picnic with the half-breed will not be known even to the citizens of Pedroville with the exception of our picked men," Moreno said.

"That is our game, of course," the mayor remarked. "And even if it was generally known I don't see how these outlaws could learn anything about it."

"That appears to be true enough," the Lone Hand remarked. "As you say, even if our design to treat the half-breed to a taste of Lynch law was known, the outlaws ought not to be aware of it, but I am going on the idea that they have spies right in this very town."

This announcement caused a look of surprise to appear on the faces of all.

"What makes you think so?" the mayor asked.

"It don't 'pear at all probable to me!" the marshal declared.

"Oh, no, decidedly not!" Moreno asserted, while Aldama parted his lips and looked wise.

The young Bostonian had not ventured to take part in the conversation, conscious that as a stranger he was not capable of offering advice.

"Well, I think that there is a great probabil-

ity that the gang have spies in Pedroville, because I have heard that is the way these fellows do business," the Lone Hand replied.

"You appear to be pretty well acquainted with the habits of these outlaws," Moreno observed, just a little bit sharply.

"Well, no, not particularly," the adventurer answered, apparently not noticing either the tone of the other or the insinuation conveyed in the speech.

"I have lived a good while on the frontier though, and, of course, have heard more or less of the doings of these outlaw gangs; and this one particular band—these Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande, as they call themselves—I heard all about when I was in El Paso some three months ago.

"They had been operating pretty freely in that neighborhood, and at the time I came to El Paso, the Texan Rangers on our side of the river and the Mexican troops on the other had been after them, hot-foot.

"The band was said to be a big one then—some thirty men, and they showed fight. They whipped the Mexicans and they cleaned out the rangers in a couple of pitched battles, but suffered so severely in the encounters, that when the soldiers and rangers were reinforced the gang were forced to disband, and at the same time it was supposed that, as a band, they would never be heard of again, but it appears they have come up smiling.

"The way they worked their game up there was to have spies in the various towns, who posted them in regard to points which it would be worth their while to attack, and gave them timely warning too, when any attempt was made to attack them."

"Oh, but I don't think it is likely that the outlaws can have any such arrangements as that in our town here!" Moreno exclaimed.

"Oh, no, 'tain't at all likely!" the marshal declared.

"It doesn't seem to me as if the thing is probable in this case," the mayor remarked.

"There are a few strangers in the town, but none of them appear to be the kind of men to be in league with such outlaws as these marauders," Aldama remarked with a wise look.

"That is so!" the mayor asserted.

"Sure as you're born!" the marshal declared.

"Of course you must take into consideration the fact that these fellows play a mighty good game, and they are not fools enough to send a spy into a town whose appearance will cause him to be suspected," the Lone Hand remarked.

He saw that the tide was setting against him, but, as long as he had begun, he resolved to complete his explanation.

"Then these fellows play the game of the old-time brigands. They never trouble a poor man, but always pitch upon the richest one they can find, and then, as they always pay in the most liberal manner for anything they want, they get all the poor class upon their side. They rob the rich to give to the poor, and by working the trick in this ingenious way, they fix it so that when the authorities get after them it is almost impossible to get any information in regard to them, for the people who profit by them will not reveal what they know.

"Of course I am not certain that the fellows have spies in the town, but if they are here, it is not likely that they can be easily spotted."

The words of the Lone Hand did not convince the others, though they all agreed that it would be best to keep the lynch matter as quiet as possible.

It did not take long to arrange the details, and then the meeting came to an end.

The agreement was that the lynch party were to meet in an old corral, just in the rear of the jail, promptly at twelve o'clock that night.

CHAPTER XII.

A CORDIAL INVITATION.

WHEN the consultation ended and the door was opened, the crowd without, who had waited patiently for the end of the conference, came eagerly forward to learn what had been decided upon.

"We did not do much of anything, fellow-citizens," the mayor explained.

"I calculate to have the copper-colored scoundrel brought before me to-morrow, and you are all invited to be present at the examination.

"Maybe I can scare the rascal into a confession, although I am rather afraid that it can't be did, for he seems to be a mighty hard case."

This announcement satisfied the crowd, and it began to slowly disperse.

Then a sudden idea occurred to the mayor.

"Now I come to think of it, Mr. Aldama, you have never introduced me to these two gentlemen," he said, nodding to the Lone Hand and the Bostonian.

"That is true, and strange as it may appear, I do not know the names of these two gentlemen who came so timely to the rescue of myself and Mr. Moreno."

"It is rather odd," the Lone Hand remarked with a smile, "but we have been so busy from our first meeting that we have neglected this little formality."

"My name is hand—L. Hand, at your ser-

vice. I am from the upper Red River district, and am making a little trip down this way in the hope of striking some good speculation, as I am considerable of a speculator.

"This gentleman"—and he laid his broad, muscular hand upon the shoulder of the Bostonian—"must answer for himself, for he is a stranger to me. I met him on the trail from Buckner just about half an hour before the time when you came along, and if we had not happened to stop in the shelter of the pines by the spring to eat our lunch, we would not have been able to interfere with the outlaws' little game."

"I am called Leonard Webster, and I am a clerk by occupation, and bear a letter of introduction from Jonathan Briggs, of —, for whom I formerly clerked, to Mose Oppenheim, the storekeeper here," the Bostonian explained.

"Gentlemen, I am pleased to make your acquaintance," the mayor said, and he shook hands in the most hearty manner with both of them.

"Of course you are aware that I am the mayor of this burg of Pedroville, and my name is Jack Hamilton, and both as mayor and private citizen I bid you welcome to Pedroville, and I assure you I will do my best to make things agreeable while you stay with us."

The two made suitable reply, thanking him for his courtesy, and then the mayor introduced the others.

"This is our marshal, Ben Jackman," Hamilton said, introducing that official, "and everybody that knows him says that he is the right man in the right place."

The marshal grinned and shook hands with the two.

"Mr. Miguel Aldama, one of the good old Spanish stock," continued the mayor with a wave of his hand toward that gentleman.

"Mr. Aldama owns the biggest ranch that thar is in this section, and has the prettiest gal for a daughter that ever stepped foot on Texan soil."

"Well, I don't know about that, Jack," the old gentleman remarked with a smile of gratification. "I think your Cordelia would run my Mercedes a pretty close race."

"That is a question which is not easily settled, for it is all a matter of taste; but I will go my pile that thar isn't two gals in this State who can go ahead of them!" the mayor exclaimed with all a father's pride.

"Mr. Maurice Moreno," Hamilton continued, indicating the young man.

"Mr. Moreno is a limb of the law, who has settled down hyer in Pedroville to grow up with the country, and though he can't boast of many clients, for thar isn't much business in his line as yet, it don't matter, for he's got the ducats, and can afford to wait."

The stranger shook hands with the rancher and the lawyer and the introductions were completed.

"And now, gentlemen," said the mayor, "as you intend to stay for a while in Pedroville I hope you will take up your quarters with me."

"Oh, come now, Hamilton, I cannot allow that!" Aldama exclaimed. "You forget that I am deeply in the debt of these two gentlemen—I may almost be said to owe them my life and I cannot permit them to accept the hospitalities of any man but myself. I claim the first right to them."

"I was about to put in my claim," Moreno remarked, "but Mr. Aldama has taken the words out of my mouth."

"Of course not being a married man with a ranch of my own, all I could offer would be what the hotel of my worthy host, Jacob Plunkett affords, but at the Rio Grande Arms they would be well taken care of, and there is no mistake in regard to that!"

"Really, gentlemen, you overwhelm me," the Lone Hand replied. "And I trust you will not think I am discourteous if I refrain from accepting any of your kind offers. I fully appreciate them, I assure you, but for a man of the world, knocking around in search of opportunities for speculation, as I expect to do while I sojourn in Pedroville, the hotel would answer my purpose much better than a private residence."

"You can come and go from my house just as free as the wind!" the mayor declared. "But I reckon I ain't really got any call for to try and take you away from Aldama hyer, for he most certainly has got a better claim to you than anybody else."

"I shall be proud and happy to entertain both of you gentlemen," Aldama observed. "But, of course, gentlemen, I understand that in such a matter the man himself can judge best, but the invitation is freely tendered."

"I fear that like Mr. Hand here I shall have to decline," the Bostonian remarked, "although feeling highly flattered by the kind offer, but if I strike a bargain with Mr. Oppenheim, which is probable, I shall, I presume, commence my duties at once."

"You'll find old Moses a tough customer," the mayor remarked, with a shake of the head. "If I were you I would try for some other job, for the old skinflint will try to get you for nothing and then work you to death afterward."

"Well, I suppose I will have to try it now

I am on the ground, particularly as I came for the express purpose," Webster replied.

"Oh, don't try to discourage the gentleman, Hamilton," Aldama remarked. "He and Oppenheim may get on very well together, for you must remember that Mr. Webster is quite a different sort of man from the clerk that Oppenheim has had."

"Anyway, Mr. Webster, my house is open to you at any time if you don't get on with Oppenheim. I presume from your appearance you are not used to ranch life."

"You are right I cannot boast of any experience in that line," the young man replied.

"That is a pity, for if you were I would be able to offer you a situation at good pay."

"Ah, you can't make a cow-puncher out of Mr. Webster; he ain't built in that way!" the mayor remarked.

"Well, you really cannot judge from my appearance just now," the Bostonian explained, "for I have risen from a sick bed and am not like myself at all. I am a fair rider, and do not doubt I could soon make myself at home on a ranch; but I will try Mr. Oppenheim—for a few weeks, if I can succeed in making any arrangement with him, and if I don't like the work, just as soon as I recover my normal strength I will come to you."

"You will be heartily welcome!" Aldama exclaimed.

"I fancy to a man like yourself, though, the life of a rancher would be exceedingly disagreeable," Moreno remarked. "I tried it once, and a very short time indeed satisfied me."

"Oh, come own up, Moreno, you were too durned lazy!" the mayor exclaimed. "Moreno has got the ducats, and so is not obliged to hustle round like a fellow who has his fortune to make. He would rather sit with his feet cocked up on a desk, with a cigarette between his teeth waiting for clients that never come than to sweat on the back of a bucking mustang."

There was a general laugh at this sally, in which the young man joined.

"Well, I reckon you are about right," he admitted. "I do not believe I will ever take a prize for industry. In fact, I believe I was born tired."

There was another laugh at this, in which the Lone Hand joined, but as he carefully surveyed the young lawyer, without apparently taking any particular notice of him, he noticed that, although he was not above the medium height, yet was magnificently built, evidently possessed of more strength than commonly falls to the lot of men of his pounds and inches, the thought of a tiger immediately came into his mind.

Moreno was a tiger of a man, as far as strength, grace and quickness were concerned.

He might be of an indolent nature, but there was nothing about the man to suggest the fact, and the Lone Hand—an excellent judge of his fellow-men—did not believe the statement.

"Well, gentlemen, I am sorry that you cannot accept our hospitality," the mayor remarked, in his frank and jovial way. "But don't forget that while you are in town the latch-string is always out and you are heartily welcome at any time."

The two pards made a suitable reply and then a sudden thought seemed to occur to Moreno.

"I suppose, Mr. Webster, you will go to the hotel and secure accommodations before calling on Mr. Oppenheim?" he said.

The Bostonian had just opened his mouth to say that he should call upon the storekeeper first, as he was more anxious to secure a place than to see about the hotel, when the Lone Hand broke in with:

"Oh, yes, he is going with me!"

Webster had sense enough not to dispute this statement, for he guessed that his pard had some good reason for making it.

"Yes, I am going with this gentlemen," he said.

"So I supposed, and I was going to say that I would call upon Mr. Oppenheim," Moreno remarked.

"The old Jew gets a good deal of trade out of me, although I am not a family man, but I buy all my cigars, tobacco and liquor there and he has always professed to be a friend of mine, and maybe a few words from me in regard to you will not do any harm."

"Certainly not! and I shall feel obliged if you will take the trouble," Webster replied.

"Oh, no trouble at all, and, as for an obligation, the boot is on the other leg."

With this the party separated, the mayor and Aldama to their homes, Moreno to visit the Jew storekeeper, while the Lone Hand and Webster proceeded to the hotel, which was only a few hundred yards away.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERY.

No words passed between the Lone Hand and Webster until they were well out of earshot of their late companions, and then the Lone Hand after glancing around to be certain that there was not any one near enough to hear his words, said:

"Well, partner, I reckon you are going to get your clerkship with the Jew all right."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because this young man—this lawyer, Moreno as he calls himself, has gone to speak a good word for you."

"Do you really think that will have any particular influence?" Webster asked, decidedly incredulous.

"Why, certainly! Don't you?"

"I am not so sure about it. I have heard in my time so many ghost stories of that kind—to give them the cant-name—that I am not inclined to put as much faith in them as I might. From all I have heard of the old Jew he is a pretty tough customer; but with me, the way I was situated, it was do or die. I had to try this, although it was like a forlorn hope, because there was nothing else open to me. I do not doubt I will get the position, for the old fellow needs a clerk badly enough, but the question is, will the old man give me enough to live on?" and Webster shook his head in an extremely dubious way.

"Well, now, I suppose you will be astonished to hear me say that I think he will offer you a very fair salary."

"I am, indeed!"

"That is my idea, and you will owe it to the good offices of this Maurice Moreno."

"Yes, if the old man does make me any kind of a fair offer, I should not be surprised if I did."

"By the way, that is rather an odd name," the Lone Hand remarked, reflectively. "Maurice Moreno."

"Yes, it is; he is of Mexican or Spanish descent, evidently, his appearance as well as his surname shows that. Moreno is Spanish-Mexican enough, but Maurice is not."

"No, Maurice is either Irish or German, most likely the first in this case. I should not be surprised if his mother was Irish by birth. If you noticed, he has a different appearance from the Spanish-Mexican usually met with along the Rio Grande; take this old rancher, Aldama, for instance."

"Very true."

"The man is of mixed blood beyond a doubt—a fellow of great courage, endurance and genius unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Upon my word he would be apt to think you were extremely complimentary if he were to hear you!"

"Well, I don't know about that," the Lone Hand answered, a peculiar smile playing upon his features. "Such men as he would sometimes prefer that the world would be in ignorance of their true qualities."

"Why so?"

"Oh, a whim, I presume," the Lone Hand answered with another one of his baffling smiles.

"Then, do you know, I have an idea that Maurice Moreno is his right name."

"Certainly, of course; why should you think otherwise?" Webster asked in astonishment.

"Well, this is the queerest country in that respect you ever saw; this is the jumping-off place of civilization. About half the men that you encounter down here are fellows who have been obliged to 'leave their country for their country's good,' and as a natural consequence they do not bear the names by which they were known at home."

"Down in this region about the greatest insult you can offer to a man is to express a doubt in regard to his name—to insinuate that the one he now bears is not the one by which he has always been known."

"Oh, yes, I have been down here long enough to have found that out."

"But to return to our mutton," observed the Lone Hand. "I do not claim to be much of a prophet, but in this case I will predict that you will not have any trouble at all in coming to terms with the Jew. You will find him anxious and eager to secure your valuable services."

Webster laughed.

"I sincerely hope your prediction will come true," he said.

"And you will owe it to Moreno's kindly interference on your behalf. He is anxious that you will have the place and you will get it."

"What makes you think so?" the Bostonian inquired in wonder.

"Did you not notice that he tried to discourage the idea of your trying a position on Aldama's ranch?"

"Yes, his speech in regard to it was certainly not encouraging."

"Exactly; for some reason of his own he does not wish you to go there. What the reason is, of course I cannot guess, being a stranger on the ground, but after I get a good look at the lay-out, I will be willing to bet all I am worth or ever expect to be, that I can tell what game he is up to."

By this time the hotel was reached, and that put a stop to the conversation.

They entered and were greeted by the landlord, Jacob Plunkett, in person.

The host was an English Jew, although beyond his prominent nose—with the true Hebrew hook and jet-black hair which curled in little tiny ringlets all over his massive head, he betrayed no signs of the race from which he came.

Dame Rumor with her thousand tongues had already informed him in regard to the strangers,

and he welcomed them in the most cordial manner.

The Lone Hand proceeded to explain in regard to himself and companion, but the landlord immediately interrupted him.

"Oh, I know all about you, gentlemen!" he exclaimed.

"News travels rapidly in a little town like Pedrovilla, and I consider it an honor to have the pleasure of entertaining two such gentlemen as yourselves." And on the heels of this declaration the landlord made a profound bow, which the guests of course acknowledged.

"Yes, sir, you are the lions of the day. Miguel Aldama and Maurice Moreno are both particular friends of mine, and I am glad to be able to entertain men who have helped them as you did by routing the outlaws. It was a big thing, gentlemen, as big a deed as has ever been heard of in this part of the country."

"Oh, you are giving us too much credit," the Lone Hand remarked, with becoming modesty. "But now touching accommodations?"

"I will take the best of care of you!" the landlord exclaimed. "And, although I say it myself who should not, I keep as good a house as you can find all along the Rio Grande, bar none!"

"I should imagine so, from the appearance of things," the Lone Hand observed, politely.

"Yes, and when it comes to the bar-room, you won't find any forty-rod whisky there, no stuff, a couple of drinks of which will lay a man out, but as good liquor as you will strike in the whole of Texas."

"I am glad to hear it, although I am not much of a drinker, yet still when I do take something I want it good."

"Exactly! that is my platform, every time!" the landlord declared.

"I shall not want regular board, as I reckon to be away a good deal prospecting—I am down here on a speculating tour, you see," the Lone Hand explained.

"Yes, yes, I see."

"I will keep my room all the time and take my meals when I am here."

"Certainly, of course. How about Mr. Webster, will he room with you, Mr. Hand?" The landlord had the names down pat.

"Well, I reckon Mr. Webster will not make much of a stop with you," the guest answered.

"You see he has come to Pedrovilla with the idea of clerking for Mr. Oppenheim. I suppose he will sleep in the store and board with that gentleman."

"Oh, yes, he will sleep in the store, under the counter while the old Jew lays on the top of it, and Moses will board him luxuriantly on crackers and cheese—when the cheese gets too hard to sell, and on Sundays for a treat he will open a twenty-five cent can of corn-beef, but only on Sundays, mind you!"

The Lone Hand laughed and the young Bostonian looked disgusted at the picture.

"Oh, come! it isn't as bad as that I hope!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"Gentlemen, I give you my word I am not exaggerating in the least!" the landlord protested.

"I trade with the man and so know all about him. That is reason why he cannot keep any clerks. They will not stay here but clear out just as soon as they get the chance. The old man is as square as a dollar, mind you, will pay every penny that he says he will, but he is bound to get the butt end of every bargain if he can."

"Well, that does not appear to be a very promising outlook for me," Webster remarked, evidently discouraged.

"I am not telling you anything but the truth, gentlemen. The last clerk he had was a poor fellow who hoofed it into town from down the river somewhere. He engaged him for two dollars a week and his board and he boarded him as I tell you. The cuss stood it for just two weeks and then he corraled his four dollars and lit out."

"Why a man like yourself, Mr. Webster, would never stand the old Jew's meanness for three days. You would get disgusted and dust, sure!"

"This is an extremely brilliant prospect before you, pard!" exclaimed the Lone Hand.

"Yes, I should say so."

"You will find it just as I say," the host protested.

"It is strange that Mr. Moreno does not know this?" the Lone Hand remarked.

"Eh, what's that?" exclaimed the landlord sharply, for the speech was directed to the young Bostonian and not to him.

"I said that it was strange that Mr. Moreno—Maurice Moreno—does not know what kind of a man the old Jew is, and the treatment he extends to his clerks."

"Oh, bless you! he knows the old skinflint like a book!"

"He does?"

"Yes, certainly!"

"What on earth did he mean by recommending my friend here to go there?"

"Did he?" exclaimed the landlord, evidently much astonished.

"Most decidedly he did," responded the Lone

Hand, taking careful note of every change of expression on the face of the host, although apparently not paying the least attention to him.

"Why, he has gone to see Mr. Oppenheim now to speak a good word for Mr. Webster here."

"You see, my dear sir,"—and the Lone Hand leaning over the counter became very confidential, "my friend here had a pressing invitation from Mr. Aldama to come to his place and the old gentleman said that he did not think there was any doubt but what he could find something for Mr. Webster to do on his ranch, but Mr. Moreno reckoned that it would be a great deal better for my friend to try the clerking with Oppenheim, and as my friend had come to Pedrovilla with the intention he thought so too."

"So, Mr. Moreno said he would go and put in a good word for Mr. Webster, and as he did a good deal of trading with the old man he reckoned it wouldn't do any harm."

The Lone Hand had purposely made the explanation as long as possible, and while he was speaking, he watched the face of the landlord as closely as a cat watches a mouse-hole from which she expects to see her prey emerge, and yet this espionage was performed so cleverly that the landlord—who was a decidedly sharp fellow and no man's fool—had no idea of the scrutiny to which he was being subjected.

The look of astonishment vanished and a peculiar, keen, shrewd look came into the man's eyes before the Lone Hand finished his recital.

"Well, Mr. Moreno will be able to do a good deal for you with the Jew for he is a good customer, and now I come to think of it"—and the landlord scratched his head in a thoughtful way as if he was trying to stimulate his memory—"it seems to me that somebody was saying in here only the other day that Oppenheim had declared that he was sick of hiring these cheap clerks and that if he got hold of a good man he would be willing to pay a good price for him."

"Ah, yes, I see!" exclaimed the Lone Hand in the most innocent manner possible, taking the bait as greedily as the greatest "tenderfoot" in Texas could have done. "Mr. Moreno knew of this and that was the reason why he recommended Mr. Webster to try the clerking."

"Yes, that is the explanation of course," the landlord remarked with a sigh of relief, as though he had cleverly got himself out of a bad position.

"It was very stupid of me not to remember it in the beginning, but then I have always been so used to poking fun at old Moses in regard to his mean ways that I had clean forgotten that the old fellow had resolved to turn over a new leaf as far as a clerk was concerned."

"Oh, that was natural under the circumstances," the Lone Hand remarked.

"But I say, Webster, suppose we go and see Oppenheim and then you will know how you stand."

"I reckon it will be all right!" the landlord declared as the pards departed.

CHAPTER XIV.

ARRANGING THE GAME.

AFTER they had got into the street, safe from any listening ears the Lone Hand put the query to his companion:

"Well, what do you think of this matter?"

"Hang me if I know!" Webster replied, decidedly perplexed.

"Where is this Jew's shebang anyway?" exclaimed the Lone Hand, the thought suddenly occurring to him that he did not know where their objective point was situated.

But hardly had the words escaped from his lips when his eyes fell upon the Jew's sign, placed on the top of a one-storied shanty-like store a short distance down the street.

"There it is now," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Let us walk slowly and we can discuss the matter as we go."

"Yes, by Jove! I am mixed up."

"Did you notice the sudden change of front in the landlord?" the Lone Hand asked. "In the beginning he laughed at the idea of your clerking for the Jew—your salary would be miserable and the old man would starve you into the bargain."

"Yes, of course, he was very decided on this point."

"But the moment he made the discovery that Moreno had interested himself in the business and had gone to speak to the Jew in your favor then he suddenly remembered that Oppenheim had said that he was going to give good wages to his next clerk."

"Yes, I notice the abrupt change and it puzzles me to account for it, for it does not seem possible that the man can be honest in his statement that he had forgotten all about it."

"Honest! of course not!" the Lone Hand declared. "No such statement was ever made. But when the landlord found that Moreno was interesting himself in the matter, then he saw that he had put his foot in it—made a bad break, to use the vulgate—by telling how mean the Jew was and he had to patch up the matter the best way he could."

"Yes, but I say, I don't understand it at all—what does it mean?"

"My dear Webster, you will never make your fortune in the detective line."

"Well, I will admit without dispute that I never expect to. I never was good at guessing riddles, puzzles or anything of that kind."

"To me the matter is quite simple; I think I can see the game, although unable to guess at the motive of the players, or to see the exact end for which they are aiming."

"Do you recall that I predicted you would secure this place with the Jew when I found Moreno was interesting himself in the matter?"

"Yes."

"I felt sure the moment he said he would speak for you that he had some hold on the Jew and that if he told Oppenheim to take you the man would do so."

"I see."

"Now, I have made another discovery which strengthens me in my belief that my suspicion was correct."

"This landlord *knows* that Moreno has a hold on the Jew and that Oppenheim will do as he says."

"He told how mean the Jew was and laughed at the idea of you clerking for him until he made the discovery that Moreno was going to recommend you, and that immediately opened his eyes to the fact that Moreno *wanted* you to take a position with the Jew; then he saw he had interfered with the game and he took the back track as soon as possible."

"Yes, that is probable enough—in fact, I do not think there is any doubt about it, but what on earth is this Moreno up to? What does it matter to him whether I am with the Jew or not? What is his game?" Webster asked, amazed at finding himself the central figure of such a puzzle.

"Ah, now you are too much for me. I am not deep enough in the game yet—have not seen enough of the cards in the hands of the other parties to guess, but three points I have settled to my satisfaction—but, stop! Before I go any further, my dear fellow, I must have an understanding with you."

"With me—how?"

"This game in which you have become involved is a deep one, but as far as I can see now, you will not be drawn into any danger, that is unless you wish to take an active part in the future."

"I have a suspicion that certain parties had got the idea into their heads that a gentleman about my size is likely to become dangerous and that it is at me they intend to strike when they get good and ready."

"Well, I think I get at your meaning and I must say I do not think you do me justice," Webster remarked, and his manner showed that he felt hurt.

"I am not a great, rough fellow, and I do not set up to be much of a fighting man, but still when it comes to the scratch I think I would be as game as the next man. Anyhow I will swear I will not show the white feather if I am shot down in my tracks. I gave you my hand before we pitched into the brigands out yonder; I was proud to be your pard, and if you are willing I will be glad to stick to you no matter how great the danger may be if I can be of any service."

"Put it there!" said the Lone Hand impulsively extending his hand.

Webster obeyed the request and the two men shook hands heartily.

"Since you are willing to enlist for the war we will put her through!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"Now for my discoveries: in the first place Moreno has a pull on the Jew, in the second, the landlord is aware of that fact, and that shows that Moreno, the Jew, and the landlord are all connected. That is an important fact to know."

"My third discovery is that this Moreno is a man who will bear watching."

"Now, mark my words, you will be engaged by Oppenheim and on good terms, and just as soon as he has a good chance he will begin to pump you in regard to myself."

"And what shall I tell him?"

"The truth, but not all of it. We were strangers, met by chance on the trail, came to this town and here we parted. That we intend to remain in communication with each other must be concealed."

"Meanwhile you must be constantly on the watch without appearing to be. You must use especial care not to excite the suspicions of the old Jew for if he was to discover that he was suspected all the fat would be in the fire."

"Of course! Oh, you can trust me to be careful, but I say, old fellow that sort of thing makes the blood tingle in my veins; it is like the excitement of the hunt."

"Yes, you are right there and the biggest game in the world is man," the Lone Hand replied.

"Now then, mark another prediction of mine. When this lynch business goes on to-night—just as the half-breed is about to be strung up the outlaw will make their appearance and rescue him, so you be on the lookout, for the gang will wipe both of us out if they can."

We must change our dress so that we cannot be recognized."

"That is a good idea; you suggested that there was danger of a rescue at the consultation to-day?"

"Yes, but they did not heed me. It is hard work to talk to men who know it all. But here we are at the Jew's, and now for another scene in the drama."

CHAPTER XV.

MORENO AND THE JEW.

AGREEABLY to what he said when he parted with Webster in front of the mayor's office, Moreno hastened immediately to Moses Oppenheim's store.

The man he sought was seated on the counter, idly swinging his long legs, waiting for the advent of customers when Moreno entered the shop.

Oppenheim was the typical Hebrew. He was tall, and as thin as a slipper pantaloons, dressed in a rusty, threadbare suit much too small for him.

He had a long head, an enormous nose, was very bald, and had a gray, thin beard like a billy-goat.

His eyes were as keen as a hawk's, yet he always had a pair of enormous, old-fashioned spectacles perched upon his nose.

He was a slippery, oily old fellow, who cringed and rubbed his hands together whenever he talked to any one.

As more than one rough cow-puncher had said to his teeth, he was one of the biggest soft-sawder frauds to be found in the whole of Texas.

And when he was addressed in such terms as this, the old man would laugh, and bow and cringe more humbly than ever, as if he considered it a compliment.

"Aha, my tear, how you vas?" exclaimed the Jew, who spoke with a decided accent, when Moreno entered the store.

"Oh, I am first-rate! Are you all alone—nobody around?" Moreno asked, casting a suspicious glance about him.

"All alone, my tear. Shust close der door, und you can talk mitout fear."

Moreno did so, and then took a seat on a barrel which stood near the counter upon which the old man sat.

"You have heard the news, I suppose?"

"Ah, yesh, my tear," and the old man heaved a deep sigh.

"Such news travels fast, eh?"

"Yesh, yesh, shust like it had on dem seven-league boots, like in der fairy tale."

"It was a nicely-planned scheme," Moreno observed, in a reflective way. "The Red Glove Raiders had us foul, for our revolvers had been doctored in some mysterious way, so that they were not of the least use to us. Aldama would have been carried off, and I presume the fellows would not have given him up until they had got fifteen or twenty thousand dollars for a ransom."

"Ah, mine gootness! dot would have been a baul!" and again the Jew sighed.

"You can bet all you are worth on it; but these two strangers sprung up just like a couple of ghosts, you know, put a ball through one man, killed the horse of the second, and stampeded the third."

"Yesh, yesh; it vas vat der poys call a surprise-barty."

"You bet it was; and now Comanche Joe is in the calaboose, and the mayor and marshal are doing their best to get some information out of him."

"Ah, but Joe will not talk," the old Jew declared. "He ish not one of dot kind!"

"You are right there; not a thing can they get out of him."

"Ah, mine gootness! der obstinacy of dose half-breeds is enough to make a man's heart bleed."

"Did you see the two men who did the trick so nicely?"

"Yesh, yesh."

"Get a good look at them?"

"Yesh."

"The young slender fellow don't amount to much. His name is Webster; he has been clerking at Brackett and by the way he is coming down here to see if he can't get a job with you. He has letters of recommendation in his pocket to you from some of your friends up there."

"A clerk I wants one bad, but dot young mans—oh! I am afraid dot too thin he ish. A small fortune vill it cost to fat put onto him."

"Well, old man, I want you to take him."

"Vat difference does it make mit you?"

"This much; if he don't get a chance with you, the chances are that he will go to Aldama's ranch, and he must be kept away from there."

"I understand it not—why should he not there go?"

"Why, you old jackass, don't you know the game I am playing?" the young man exclaimed, harshly. "Haven't I been doing my level best to make myself agreeable to the old man's daughter, Mercedes, the sole heir to all his wealth?"

and I must say, though it is not flattering to myself at all, that I have not been near as successful in that game as I thought I would be. And now, just as I am beginning to believe the girl is getting a little interested in me, do you think I want to have a good looking gentlemanly fellow like this Webster quartered right in the ranch itself, where he will have a chance to see the girl fifty times a day?"

"Oh, no, my tear, that would not do at all!" the old man exclaimed, wagging his bald head too and fro like the toy Chinamen.

"Of course it wouldn't do, and I must do all in my power to stop it."

"Luckily, the fellow didn't want to go there for he has an idea that ranch life would be too hard for him."

"Yesh, yesh, he shall have a nice soft job mit me here," and the old Jew grinned.

"Yes, but I say, you cannot come the same game on this fellow that you did on your last clerk," Moreno observed. "He is no two-dollars a week chap."

"Oh, vell, since you speak for him I will give him three."

"Three devils!" cried Moreno, harshly.

"Mine gootness, no! Not devils, my tear, tollars."

"You will give him ten a week—"

"Ten mit der week?" cried the old Jew in a sort of shrill squeal.

"Oh, mine gootness, why not say for him to take der whole business?"

"That is all right, you pay five and I will fork over the rest, and you will not have to board him for he will probably stop at the hotel."

"Five tollars is too much!" and the old man shook his head in a melancholy way.

"That is what you will pay, and I don't want any talk about it either!" the other cried.

"And you may thank your lucky stars that I don't make you pay the whole."

"Yesh, yesh, I vill pay der five tollars, my tear," the Jew exclaimed, hastily, evidently afraid that the other might be as good as his word.

"Well, that settles him then; while he is in the store you can keep an eye on him, and I will look out for him at the hotel."

"He is not dangerous though; it is his companion that I fear."

"The tall fellow—he ish a fine mans."

"Yes, and the impression has come to me that I have met him somewhere before."

"Ish dot so?"

"Yes, but I cannot place the fellow or remember aught in regard to the circumstance. In fact, my mind is in such a haze about the matter that it does not really seem possible that I have encountered him, yet there is something about the man that seems familiar."

"Dot ish strange."

"Yes, and it worries me. Did you notice what an upright carriage he has and that he bears himself like a man who has been used to command?"

"Dot ish true; mit mine own eyes I saw dot."

"Yes, and the suspicion has occurred to me that he is an officer of the United States Army in disguise."

"Yesh, yesh—come down here der Red Glove gang to look after."

"That was my thought."

"Dot would be rough on der poys," the old man observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and if that suspicion is true it would account for my thinking that I have met the man before."

"How ish dot? I cannot see."

"Why, he is a bloodhound in disguise; I have met many bloodhounds in my time, and as all these man-hunters come in years to bear a resemblance to each other, the fellow appears familiar enough to me to make me think I have encountered him somewhere when it is not the truth—we are strangers."

"My tear, dot ish too fine spun for your uncle. I cannot me much stock in dot take."

"Oh, it is only a fancy of course, but it has served to put me on my guard, and whether the man is a bloodhound or not, I shall look out for him."

"Dot ish all right!"

"By the way, as they have not been able to make Comanche Joe talk, the mayor and marshal proposed to try a little lynch business on him to-night."

"How ish dot?"

"They are going to disguise themselves and break into the calaboose at midnight, take Joe out, put a rope around his neck and run him up to a convenient tree until he concludes to tell what he knows."

"Dot vill be a surprise-barty on Joe, but cannot his hards some trick like dot blay?" the old Jew asked, with a shrewd smile.

"You bet your life they can!" Moreno replied. "The mayor and marshal think they are smart, but they may get a surprise to night that they do not expect."

"Well I must be off, for I have work to do between now and midnight. Engage this fellow and keep your eyes upon him!"

"Oh, yes, my tear!"

And then Moreno departed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BOSTONIAN APPLIES.

AFTER the young man departed the old Jew gazed after him for a moment in an extremely thoughtful way, then he wagged his grotesque bald head to and fro.

"Aha, my tear, you play an extremely bold game, and mooch I fear dot some fine day on dot game you vill slip up and den dere vill be the blazes to pay.

"But it concerns me not. Oh, no, I am not dot kind of a mans. I do a square pisness; everybody in der town vill bear witness to dot. It is not mine fault if one of mine gustomers gets a leetle off.

"Und what foolishness der mans makes mit dis clerk! Dot five tollars mit der week he might as vell throw into der river.

"Of it is der vill of brovidence dot old Al-dama's daughter und dis young mans comes together, dey vill come und don't you forget it."

By which remark it will be perceived that the old Jew was something of a fatalist, like the most of men who descended from the races of the far East.

The meditations of the aged Hebrew were interrupted by the appearance of the two strangers.

When Webster, who led the way, and the Lone Hand entered the store, the Jew descended from the counter and advanced to meet them, bowing and cringing as though he believed them to be customers come to leave a goodly sum of money in his till.

"Is this Mr. Oppenheim?" the Bostonian asked.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish my poor name," the Jew responded bowing more lowly than before.

"Vat can I do for you, shentlemen?"

"My name is Webster—Leonard Webster, and I bring a letter of introduction from Mr. Jonathan Briggs of Brackett," and the young man handed the epistle to the Jew.

"Ah, yesh, from mine very goot frien' Mr. Briggs!" Oppenheim exclaimed as he opened the letter. "It does mine heart goot to hear from Mister Briggs, for he ish der squarest kind of a man."

Then the old fellow perused the letter while the Lone Hand improved the opportunity to take a good look at him.

But the Jew was not so busy with the letter as not to be aware that he was being inspected, and the fact made him nervous, for while he was apparently busied in the letter yet out of the corner of his eyes he was watching the Lone Hand.

"Mine gootness!" the Hebrew muttered under his breath, "vat eyes dot man has. Dey go through a mans like der pair of gimlets.

"Oh, I am not surprised dot Moreno don't like der looks of dis mans. I like him not mineself.

"He is a bad mans mit a glass eye und you bet your boot. I vill go slow while he is der town in."

By this time he had come to the end of the letter, so he again raised his eyes and beamed on the young man.

"Mine goot frien' Mr. Briggs say dot you were a clerk mit him and dot you would like to try it a while mit me."

"Yes, I had the misfortune to fall sick and during my illness he had to get another man, so when I recovered I found my job gone. I did not care to remain in Brackett anyway for I don't think the climate there agreed with me," Webster explained.

"Yesh, yesh, I see."

"So, hearing that you wanted a clerk, I got this letter from Mr. Briggs and started for Pedrovilla."

"Dot vas right," the old man remarked, with an approving nod. "One blace it ish not goot to stay in too long sometimes."

"You are in want of a clerk, then?"

"Oh, yesh, my trade is too big for one mans to handle, but I am afraid dot der pay will no be pig enough for you. Dot mans, Mister Briggs, I know shoost like der back of mine hand; he mooch more monish gives dan I can afford me to pay," the old Jew remarked.

"I got twelve dollars a week with him."

"Vat did I tell you!" exclaimed Oppenheim, elevating his eyebrows and throwing up his hands as though astonished at the magnitude of the sum.

"Many is der week when I do not make more ash twelve dollars here mineself," he declared.

"In a day, you mean," the Lone Hand added, dryly.

"Vhy not say in der hour, when you goes in mit a joke to crack?" the old man asked, with a crafty smile.

"Well, I suppose that is nearer the figure," the other remarked, soberly, as though he took the Jew's sarcastic statement for a literal fact. "Ten or twelve dollars an hour, a hundred odd dollars a day, six hundred a week—"

"Yesh, yesh, four or five hundred t'ousand tollars mit der year," exclaimed Oppenheim, throwing his hands up excitedly.

"Oh, vile you are about it make you a goot story out, und den der first thing you know ve vill have der Red Glove Raiders carrying me up in der hills und holding in onto me until I fifty t'ousand tollars fork over."

"Oh, no, there is not the least danger of that," the Lone Hand exclaimed, confidently.

"I am not so sure, mine fr'en'."

"Dog will not eat dog, you know, and the Red Glove Raiders would never think of troubling a man like you, right in the same line of business as themselves."

It was a jest of course; the manner of the speaker plainly showed that, yet when the words fell upon the ears of the old Jew it produced the same effect as though a glass of ice-water had been suddenly poured down the small of his back, and it required all his self-possession to prevent his betraying how deeply he was affected.

As it was, he changed color, and a slight shiver shook his frame.

"Ah, mine goot frien', for gootness sake do not a joke make 'bout dem Red Glove Raiders," he exclaimed. "It sends der cold chills up und down my backbone every time I hear me mit mine ears der name of dose rascals."

The Lone Hand laughed.

"Oh, you must not mind a joke," he said, and in his sleeve he chuckled as he saw how straight to the mark his apparently random shot had gone.

"Vell, to der last clerk I gave two tollars per week and boarded him," the Jew said, in a hasty way, as though desirous of not again touching upon the disagreeable subject of the outlaws.

"I don't really think I could work quite as low as that," Webster remarked.

"Oh, no, mine goot sir, I do not ask you to come for dot money," the Hebrew exclaimed. "He was a common mans—no such mans as you are, but der best I can do mit you would be ten tollars per week, und you find your own board."

"Do you require me to sleep in the store?"

"Oh, no, I sleep here mineself; one mans is enough to watch the property."

"Very well, those terms will suit me, I accept the offer. When do you want me to commence?"

"Right away, my tear! Der quicker you begin der quicker you vill get posted."

"That is true," Webster replied. "Well, I will go up to the hotel and make arrangements for my board and then be right back."

"Dot vill do. This shentleman, I suppose, does not a situation vant?" the Jew remarked, with a grin, nodding to the Lone Hand as he spoke.

"Not at present, thank you, but have you another vacancy?" the Arkansian asked.

"Oh, my gootness, no! One mans is all der pisness vill stand. I was merely talking for der sake of making a ioke."

"A jokel! I don't see anything of a joke about it!"

"You hafe not introduced me to your frien' yet, Mister Webster," the Jew remarked, grinning all the while as though he was greatly enjoying something.

"This is Mr. Hand, Mr. Oppenheim," the Bostonian said.

The Jew shook hands with the Arkansian in the warmest manner, and then he nodded and winked mysteriously.

"Mister Hand, eh? Dot vas goot! Vot ish der first part of your handle?"

"L.—L. Hand."

"Ah, yesh, dot vas betterish goot!" and the old man chuckled, hugely.

"L. Hand—lone hand, aha? Und dot ish der kind of game dot you come down here to blay, colonel?"

"Colonel? What the douce are you driving at?"

"Oh, dot ish right. I vill not give it away!" "Give what away?" asked the Lone Hand, with an air of amazement.

"Dot is all right!" and the aged Hebrew winked in the most mysterious manner. "I thought I had before seen you de first time I mine two eyes laid on you, but I vas not sure, for I am mooch troubled mit near-sightedness. I tink I met you mit your command at Fort Franklin or at El Paso der time of der border droubles when you drove der Mexican troops across der river."

"Oh, see here, you have made a mistake and are barking up the wrong tree!" the Lone Hand exclaimed. "I am no soldier and no more a colonel than you are!"

"Mine gootness! is dot so?"

"Sure as you are born; you can bet all your wealth on it, Moses, and you would win every time."

"Mebbe I hafe a mistake made," the Jew remarked, but he shook his head as though he felt extremely doubtful in regard to the fact.

"Oh, you have, and there is no mistake about that. My name is L. Hand, at your service; I am a speculator down in this country on a prospecting trip seeking what I can devour, and if you hear of any good chance for business I will be much obliged if you will put me onto it."

"Yesh, yesh, I shall be glad."

"I will be back to commence my duties in half an hour," Webster said, and then the pards departed, leaving Moses Oppenheim a prey to great uneasiness.

"Mine gootness gracious!" he exclaimed, after the door closed behind his visitors, "dot is a

dangerous man! I would not for ten t'ousand tollars hafe dot mans get me after, oh, no!"

And the old Jew wagged his head more rapidly than ever.

"If der poys know when they are vell off dot mans dey vill put out of der vay as quickly as possible."

"Oh, mine gootness! dem gimlet eyes of his look right through a mans into his very heart."

"Aha, I vill as straight as der chalk line walk while dot mans der town is in!"

Possibly it was a wise conclusion at which the aged Hebrew had arrived.

CHAPTER XVII.

PREPARING THE TRAP.

"WELL, well, I begin to think that I have got hold of the extremity of an extremely long-tailed rat here," the Lone Hand remarked to his companion as they retraced their steps toward the hotel.

"That is good! Of course I am not much of a judge in such matters but dull as I am I could see that you had the Jew pretty well bothered there one time."

"Yes, my shot went straight to the mark and it made the old rascal wince, and yet I do not doubt that he has everything so well covered up that in the event of an explosion it would be difficult to get proof to connect him with the matter."

"It was his guilty conscience that made him wince."

"Yes, and how cunningly the old scoundrel jumped to the conclusion that I was a United States soldier in disguise and tried to entrap me into owning it."

"The trick did not succeed though."

"No, because in the first place I am not, so the guess went wide of the mark, although I have seen service for I fought in the war and rose to the grade of a captain, but at the close of the struggle like the vast majority of the men who served I retired to private life and did not seek to obtain a commission in the regular army."

"But if I had been a colonel of the regulars come down here in disguise with the idea of getting on the track of these outlaws I would not be idiot enough to acknowledge the truth to the first man who made a shrewd guess at it."

"He pretended to recognize you."

"That was all humbug of course! The old fellow never laid eyes on me before my advent in this town in his life."

By this time the two were near the hotel.

"Let us stroll on down to the calaboose," the Lone Hand remarked. "It will not take us long, and you will have plenty of time to arrange with the landlord when you return."

"Yes, of course."

And the two walked past the hotel toward the calaboose which was at the extreme end of the town.

"I want to get an idea of the lay of the land in reference to this little pleasure party to night," the Lone Hand remarked as they walked along.

"I have been thinking the matter over and I have come to the conclusion that it will not be healthy for either you or I to take part in that lynch business to-night unless we are so well disguised that we cannot possibly be recognized."

"If you remember I said something to this effect before."

"Very true."

"I thought then that we could disguise ourselves, but upon reflection I see that it will not be an easy matter. You might possibly do it, but as I am rather taller and somewhat broader across the shoulders than the average of men the chances seem to me to be about a hundred to one that I would be spotted."

"Yes, it is likely."

"And, as the boys say, the Red Glove Raiders have 'got it in' for both of us—a gentleman about my size in particular."

"Now I feel as sure as a man can feel in this world about something that it is impossible for him to be absolutely certain of, that the outlaws will make a dash on the lynch party to-night in order to rescue the half-breed, and as I have a suspicion that some of the gang will be in the lynch party it will be an easy matter in the confusion attending the rescue for the scoundrels to put a few revolver balls into us, thus rudely cutting our thread of life in twain."

"Oh, undoubtedly it would be an easy matter, and, hang me! if I want to give them the chance."

"That is my idea to a hair; I don't want them to get a whack at me and I do want a chance at them, but the thing must be worked so they will not have any suspicions that we do not intend to give them an opportunity to assassinate us."

"The first point is to locate the tree to which they will be likely to take the half-breed; they will be more apt to take him toward the open country than up into the town."

"Undoubtedly."

By this time the pair had got past the calaboose.

As we have said this building was on the outskirts of the town; beyond it were only a half-

a-dozen houses, rude cabins all of them, scattered along the road.

The town of Pedroville and the country adjacent to it along the bank of the Rio Grande could not boast of many trees, and the few that grew in this tract were small.

There had been some good-sized timber in the neighborhood, but the settlers had cut it down for the purpose of building their cabins.

Down the road though in front of the third cabin on the right hand—on the same side as the calaboose—was a fair-sized oak which had been struck by lightning and killed.

Nearly all the top was gone, but some ten feet from the ground a withered branch, about as big round as a man's arm, projected.

"That will be the tree," the Lone Hand remarked as he called Webster's attention to it.

"It will surely be selected for it is the only one in the neighborhood that will do."

And then the keen-eyed adventurer pointed out to his companion that the nearest cabin on the other side of the street was a deserted, tumble-down affair, and around it a regular jungle of shrubbery had grown up.

"That is the very spot to serve the outlaws for an ambush," he said. "Covered by that shrubbery they will be able to approach within a couple of hundred yards of the lynchers before the latter will have any suspicion of their presence. Then a bold dash, accompanied with plenty of pistol-shots will stampede the lynchers and send them howling into the town as though the very devil was after them."

"Oh, yes, the game can be worked easily enough."

"Yet if I should explain to the mayor and marshal as I have to you, the chances are big that I could not get them to believe the trick could be done. But by explaining I should spoil the picnic, for the Red Glove Raiders have plenty of spies in the town I am convinced, and if they knew their game was suspected they would not play it that way but try some other dodge, so you see we will be forced to play our game without assistance."

"A couple of lone hands, eh?"

"Yes, that is about the idea, and this cabin here will answer our purpose fully if we get into it to-night without exciting suspicion."

"Suppose we go for a drink of water and so have a talk with the occupant?"

"That will do, first rate!"

And odd old fellow—a regular southwesterner—kept bachelor's hall in the cabin, and when the pair passed around to the rear so as to get at the well, they noticed that the rear wall of the building displayed a liberal assortment of skins placed there to dry.

Reference to these skins developed the fact that the old man was a hunter by profession, and as he boasted, made a good living by his skill in that line.

Every night he spent in the woods and rarely returned until the gray light of the morn began to line the eastern skies.

This left the coast clear for the pair to occupy the cabin, as the Lone Hand remarked to his companion as they retraced their steps to the hotel.

"So when the Red Glove Raiders spring their little surprise-party on the citizens to-night, we will be able to astonish them fully as much as they will astonish the citizens," the Lone Hand remarked with a deal of satisfaction.

"The outlaws will owe you a heavy debt before you get through," Webster remarked.

"If I succeed in my designs, I will destroy the outlaw band root and branch!" the other replied in a tone of firm determination.

"They will have cause then to regret the day when you struck in upon their trail."

"I shall try my best to convey that impression to them," the Lone Hand remarked in his quiet way.

When the hotel was reached, Webster arranged with the landlord in regard to his board, and then taking leave of his companion, set out for the store of the old Jew.

The Lone Hand sat down in the office, which was both office and bar-room combined, as is commonly the case in all the taverns along the Rio Grande, took up a newspaper and began to read.

As he had expected, the landlord soon came over and took a seat by his side.

"How do you like this section?" he asked.

"Well, I have hardly been here long enough to be qualified to pass an opinion."

"It is a nice country for business; I suppose you are looking for a chance to get an opening?"

"Yes."

"In the ranch line?"

"I have run a ranch."

"The ranchers are all doing very well down this way now. Old Aldama, the man you rescued from the outlaws, you know, is worth nigh onto a million I reckon, although he had a big pile of money left him by his father, who was one of the old-fashion Spanish Dons, still he has made a heap of money out of his ranch, then the mayor, Jack Hamilton, is well fixed, and the marshal ain't badly off. If you understand ranch life and can get a good location, there's millions in the business."

"Yes, but I am afraid that it requires more capital than I am able to command at present."

"Oh, I see," and the landlord hitched his chair up a little closer to his guest, looked around him in a mysterious way, and then remarked, sinking his voice to a low and guarded tone:

"I know a speculation that thar's a heap of money in, but a man will have to take big risks."

"Well, that would not frighten me—what is it?"

"These outlaws!"

"Yes?"

"Thar's big money offered for their capture both in Mexico and in this State. I used to live in El Paso and know all about them. There is about a thousand apiece offered for the men and about five thousand for the captain of the band."

"Who is he?"

"Ah, that is what nobody knows; but thar's big money for the man who gets them, alive or dead."

"Well, I think there is a little bit too much risk in that speculation," the Lone Hand replied, with a laugh. "I got the best of the gang once, but I reckon they will never let me get the drop on them again. No, I want money, but I ain't hankering to get it that way."

Then the eyes of Lone Hand fell upon the figure of a well-dressed, beautiful girl coming up the street.

"Hello! she is a beauty!" he exclaimed.

"Mercedes Aldama," the landlord replied.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BELLES OF PEDROVILLE.

"ANY relation to the old gentleman?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Yes, this girl is his daughter."

"Ah, now I look at her closely, I think I can detect a resemblance. She is decidedly a handsome girl. I presume she is the belle of the town."

"Some people think so, but I prefer Mayor Hamilton's daughter."

"Is the mayor also favored with a beautiful child?"

"Yes, his daughter, Cordelia, is to my thinking, the handsomer girl of the two; but then, that is all a matter of taste, you know. She is a blonde, while this other is a brunette, and I prefer light girls to dark."

"A great many people do; as you say, it is a mere matter of opinion. I suppose the two young ladies are rivals."

"Oh, no, on the contrary they are the nearest and dearest friends, and one is seldom seen on the street without the other. I reckon Miss Mercedes is on her way to the mayor's house now."

The girl passed, and then the landlord turned the conversation into other channels.

In the most dextrous manner possible he endeavored to lead the Lone Hand into talking about himself, where he had been, what he had done, etc., but the Arkansian was on his guard, for he guessed what the landlord was up to the moment he began, and so, after the landlord had wasted the better part of an hour, he was forced to give up the pumping operation, and could not boast that he knew much more about the stranger than when he began; and yet the other had apparently spoken in the frankest manner and had not manifested any wish to conceal anything.

And now leaving the Lone Hand to enjoy his newspaper we will turn our attention to the daughter of Miguel Aldama whom we have been tardy in introducing to our reader's notice.

Mercedes Aldama was a magnificent-looking girl of the pure Castilian type of beauty; black eyes, black hair, regular features, exquisitely cut complexion bronzed by the kiss of the eager sun-god, as graceful as a deer, seemingly as proud as a queen, and yet in reality soft and gentle in her nature.

As the landlord had conjectured the girl was hastening to the house of her bosom friend.

Cordelia Hamilton was as decided a contrast to the girl of Spanish descent as the day is to night.

She was about the same size—both of medium height and build, but a blonde with golden hair and great blue eyes.

Cordelia had been expecting her friend and was quick to admit her when she came to the door.

"I thought you would come or else I should have come to you!" the mayor's daughter exclaimed after exchanging a welcoming caress with her friend.

"You have heard all the particulars about my father's narrow escape from these outlaws?" Mercedes said.

"Yes, and what a lucky thing it was that these two strangers happened to come so timely to the rescue."

"Had it not been for them my father would have been carried away by these outlaws and held for a heavy ransom."

"Mr. Moreno also had a narrow escape, and if both had been captured it would have been a dreadful blow to you—father and lover borne away at one fell swoop."

"Oh, do not talk like that!" Mercedes exclaimed. "Mr. Moreno is not my lover!"

"Well, he wants to be."

"Possibly, but he is not."

"I am sure he pays you the most devoted attention."

"I might with truth say the same thing in regard to the gentleman and yourself."

"Yes, I know that," replied Cordelia with a weary laugh. "For quite a time this dashing cavalier wavered between us two, like the donkey in the fable between the two bundles of hay, and for the same reason I think."

"He could not make up his mind which one of us he liked best?"

"No, I don't think he troubled his mind about that at all. Although he pretends to be very sentimental, I do not believe there is the least bit of sentiment about him."

"All that he hesitated for was to ascertain which one of us would be apt to have the most money in the long run!"

"Oh, fie, Cordelia!" exclaimed Mercedes, shaking her finger archly at the other, "what a terrible character you are giving the gentleman. Why, you are making him out to be a regular fortune-hunter."

"And it is the truth, too: that is exactly what he is."

"Do you really think so?"

"I am certain of it!" the other replied, firmly. "I will admit that I did not like the fellow from the beginning, and though for a time he paid the most devoted attention to me, and father was rather inclined to favor his suit, too, yet there was something about the man that I did not like."

"I confess I have the same instinctive dislike," Mercedes observed.

"I very soon got the idea that he wasn't anything but a fortune-hunter in search of a rich girl, and so I resolved to put him to the test."

"Oh, is it possible?" the other exclaimed in amazement.

"Yes; then that is something which you would never dream of doing, eh?"

"No, I do not believe I would," Mercedes answered, in her sober way.

"Well, you see, you are not such a wild thing as I am; but to play a trick of that kind is just what I delight in."

"And then I thought it was pretty fair, too," the mayor's daughter continued. "The gentleman professed to be over head and ears in love with me, and when a man makes such professions as that, I think he has no right to complain if he is put to the test to ascertain whether he really means what he says or not."

"It certainly does seem to be only right," Mercedes observed, thoughtfully.

"That certainly is my opinion. Well, the way I tested the gentleman was this. He is a very cunning fellow, or he thinks he is, much the same thing, you know, and in a careless, indifferent way he tried to ascertain just about how much my father was worth."

"I am such a dear little innocent creature, you know, that he never even dreamed that I suspected what he was trying to find out the moment he began the operation."

"Oh, you are a witch!" the other exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know about that; but I am no man's fool, though, that is certain," Cordelia replied.

"Well, I answered his questions just as innocently as a child of ten years—a dear little darling, who hasn't any idea that there is any guile in this bright, beautiful world."

"Oh, you mischief!"

"When he questioned me in the most skillful and adroit manner in regard to how my father was getting along, I told him some dreadful fibs."

"Oh, my!"

"The end justifies the means," the mayor's daughter retorted.

"Here was a fortune-hunter, making love to me under false pretenses, telling me what a beautiful and charming girl I was—what an angelic temper, and all such rubbish, while everybody who knows me, knows well enough that though I have a fair share of good looks, yet my temper is decidedly vixenish."

"Oh, no, you do not do yourself justice!"

"Yes, I do; here are you with your big black eyes and your delightful Spanish style, just like a tragedy queen, the kind of girl who would fly to poisons and daggers if she was wronged, yet in reality you are as mild as mother's milk, while I, with my mild, innocent blue eyes and general cow-like aspect, have a temper like a little demon."

"You neither do justice to yourself nor to me!" Mercedes declared.

"Well, never mind that! When you tell a story you must always exaggerate a little, or else you will not make it interesting."

"But, to resume; I met my gentleman with his own weapons, and, little by little, I contrived to inform him, without apparently being conscious that I was betraying anything, that my father had attempted to do too much on too little capital, and though he had the reputation of being a very rich man, yet it was as much as he could do to struggle along, and but for the fact that he got some old-time friends in South-

ern Texas to aid him, he would have been forced to give up the greater part of his enterprises."

"Well, well, you did draw a dismal picture!" exclaimed Mercedes, laughing at the idea.

"Yes, but mind you, I did not admit this all at once, but allowed Mr. Moreno to draw it from me little by little, and I amused myself by watching how his ardor in love-making seemed to decline in proportion to my revelations of my father's want of success."

"Most certainly, Delia, you are the greatest humbug that ever breathed the air of Texas!" Mercedes declared.

"Oh, no, not half so big a humbug as this dashing Mr. Moreno, who talks so carelessly of his family estates in Mexico, a trifle of three or four thousand acres, with countless cattle and horses, and three or four gold mines thrown in, too, I believe, not very big gold mines, but just medium-sized, nice, little kind of pocket gold mines," and then the girl burst into a fit of laughter.

"I never would have thought of playing such a trick."

"No, of course not, you old sobersides. No one but a wild imp of mischief like myself would have done it."

"Then, too, as I so innocently revealed the story of my father's want of prosperity, I mentioned, just by accident, you know, how rich your father was, and what a large property you would inherit—one of these days, three or four millions I put the figures, if I remember rightly."

"Oh, how could you?"

"Well, I had tired of him and wanted to see if I could get him to transfer his attentions to you, and the scheme succeeded beautifully."

"When he discovered that there was a probability that some day you would get millions to my thousands, he quickly transferred his allegiance; deserted from me and knelt to worship at your shrine."

"I am sure that I do not want him, even if I was satisfied he was attracted by myself and not by my money."

"By the way, have you seen these two gentlemen who rescued your father from the outlaws?"

"No, not yet; although I confess I should like to very much, for father's description has excited my curiosity."

"Well, I have had the pleasure of seeing them twice, and they are just perfectly splendid!"

"How you go on!"

"Oh, it is the truth, and you will say so when you see them. They have passed the house twice to-day, but as I wasn't dressed for conquest, I did not show myself."

"Oh, if any one who did not know you should hear you talk what would they think?"

"That I was a charming girl, too sweet for anything and all that, of course!" Cordelia exclaimed with an outburst of laughter.

"Do be a little serious for once in your life!" Mercedes cried, laughing in spite of himself at the odd speeches of her friend.

"I will be a little serious—as little as I can," the other replied demurely.

"But now for these two gentlemen. I found out all about them from father, while I don't believe you asked your aged sire a question."

"Oh, yes, I did."

"I will bet you what you like that you did not ask one question to my hundred!" Cordelia exclaimed.

"I should not be surprised if that was true."

"Well, I have found out all about them—that is, I mean as much as anybody knows. The tall, manly-looking fellow, who is the very beau ideal of the ancient cavalier, is a Mr. Hand; not a very romantic name, is it?"

"No, certainly not."

"But the gentleman is romantic-looking enough to make up for it. He is just the man to suit you, for he is a quiet, sober fellow, and as I don't want him—he isn't my style—you can have him."

"I am really very much obliged to you for your kindness," and the girl made a mock bow. "But are you sure, dear, that I will want him after I see him?"

"Oh, yes, I do not think there is any doubt about that. He is just the kind of fellow to suit you."

"But I may not suit him."

"Well, if he can resist your charms, his heart must be steeled to womankind."

"Ah, what a base flatterer you are!"

"Oh, it is the truth and you know it! Well, to resume my description, the other gentleman is named Webster—Leonard Webster; there is a pretty name for you now. He's a Yank, and I am dead in love with him at first sight."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, but I am; it is a clear case. I never felt so in my life before, and just think, a Yankee too. Isn't it dreadful?"

"I do not really see what difference it makes."

"Oh, well, you are half Mexican anyway; you are not a real old, dyed-in-the-wool Southern girl as I am. I was kind of brought up to hate all Yankees; when I was a little girl I regarded them as a species of hobgoblin, but during the last few years I have been getting bravely over

it, and now I am clean gone on this young Yankee. That is awful slangy, isn't it? I am getting dreadful."

"You had better be careful or you will not succeed in catching your Yankee," the other warned.

"Oh, I am all right if I don't open my mouth, but when I do, as the saying is, I generally put my foot in it."

"But to return to my Yankee. He is from Boston, a Yankee of the Yankees, you see, and he has just got over a long fit of sickness, so he looks real pale and interesting, and he is expecting to get a place as clerk in old Moses Oppenheim's store."

"I should not think that would be a very agreeable position for him."

"Neither should I, and I can just tell you, Delia, that after I get acquainted with the gentleman, if he turns out to be all my fancy paints, and I feel sure he will do so, I am going to talk to my respected dad and make him find some place on the ranch for him."

"Pa needs a bookkeeper, or an overseer, or something, whose work will be light and pay good, I am sure, and if there isn't any place, one must be made."

"At what a rate you go on!"

"Yes; but you will not be able to corral your cavalier in that way, for he is a speculator and doesn't need a position. If you like him, though, after you became acquainted, you might suggest to your pa that the work is too hard for him, and that it would be a good idea to sell this stranger an interest in the ranch."

"Oh, you are incorrigible!"

"Yes, I know it, but I'm awful cunning, too! But come, let's go to the store, I want some ribbons, and we can see if that dear, pale Yank is there."

Mercedes finally consented to go, and the pair visited the shop of the old Jew, where Webster had the pleasure of waiting upon them, and the impression he made upon the girls was extremely favorable, and he himself was struck with the beauty of the pair; but the lively mayor's daughter made more impression upon him than the quiet Mercedes.

The two left the store, feeling decidedly pleased with their interview with the new clerk.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Cordelia, on the homeward road. "Isn't he just delightful?"

"He certainly seems to be a thorough gentleman," Mercedes responded.

"He is my Yank, and don't you dare to make sheep's eyes at him! I claim him on the original discovery. But, I say, I will help you out with your cavalier. I will tell your father that I am just dying to make his acquaintance, and ask him to invite him to dinner, and ask me, too, so I can meet him."

"Oh, what a giddy thing you are!"

"I will do it the very first time I see your father!" she declared. "In fact, I will go home with you this afternoon, for I really am anxious to meet him."

And the girl was as good as her word.

CHAPTER XIX.

A VISITOR TO THE HALF-BREED.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day that the events related in our previous chapters took place. Ben Jackman, the marshal, and Moreno were standing conversing in front of the mayor's office.

Moreno, in passing, had encountered the marshal, and stopped to inquire if all preparations had been made for the lynch attack.

"Yes, I have got the rope and the masks ready, but I haven't notified all the men yet," the marshal replied.

"You see it is pretty risky business giving out a thing like this to ten or fifteen men, for some one of them might get a little too much bug-juice on board and then go and give the hull thing away."

"Yes, such a thing is not improbable."

"You bet! I am onto Slab Kellogg—I know Slab from 'way-back and he is just the kind of man that, if he got wind of a picnic of this kind, would be apt to get his back up and rave round for to make trouble."

"I should think so from what I have seen of him, although I am not well acquainted with Kellogg."

"He is jest that kind of man to be ugly as sin if he took the notion into his head."

"You see, he would be apt to git the idee that we hadn't any right to play roots on him in no sich way."

"Very likely."

"The calaboose is strongly built, Slab is well-armed, and if we don't get the deadwood on him by taking him unawares, the chances are a thousand to one that he would be able to hold the calaboose ag'in' an army."

"No doubt of it!"

"Now, we don't want to kill Slab, neither do we want the galoot to lay any of us out."

"Certainly not!"

"So I sha'n't pass the word around among the boys 'bout j'ining in this surprise-party until about nine o'clock."

"By that time Slab is generally as full as a goat, for he has his bottle of benzine brought to

him regular every night 'bout eight o'clock; his dose is a pint, and arter he gits it into his hide he jest lays off for the night."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"So, by waiting until about nine there isn't any danger of his getting into the thing."

"Exactly! I see you are working the trick right up to the handle."

"Wal, if I can't, I reckon thar's no man in the town kin!" the marshal boasted.

At this point a stranger came along.

He was a big, overgrown, slouchy looking fellow, roughly dressed, and from the fact that he wore a pea-jacket very much the worse for wear, it would seem that the man had at one time followed the sea, and he had a sort of roll to his walk too, which is natural to sailors.

"Say, mates, kin you tell me whar'bouts in this hyer town I kin find the marshal?" he asked as he halted by the pair.

He was a tough-looking chap with a weather-beaten face, the greater part of which was hidden by a short, brushy black beard.

"Wal, stranger, I reckon I kin fill the bill if the town marshal is what you are arter."

"Sho'! are you Ben Jackman?"

"That is my handle!"

"Waal, I am right glad to see you. My name is Tozer—Bill Tozer; I am a blooming Britisher, I am, although I am a darned long way from home."

"Yes, I should say so," the marshal remarked, seeing that the fellow expected him to say something.

"Oh, yes, a long way from the town where I first saw the light!" the man exclaimed.

"I'm a brum, I am, a brum from Birmingham, and when I war across the herring-pond I used to do a little with my fists, being one of the coves w'ot loves a mill, jab, stop and get away!"

And the man sparred at an imaginary antagonist.

"Oh, I was one of the nobbs in that time, I tell you, and could hold my own with any of the lads in the division!"

"In those days they used for to call me the Birmingham Infant."

"A healthy-looking infant you are!" the marshal remarked.

"Oh, I bet yer! But I say, Jackman, my tulip, I have come to Pedroville on business this round."

"Is that so?"

"You bet! I have been working on a ranch 'bout forty miles up the Rio Grande, and I started from thar a couple of days ago to come down to this section, thinking I could do better. I was well-heeled, you bet! a good hundred chucks in my pocket and as fine a mule as any man should want to ride, but when I got 'bout twenty miles from Pedroville, hyer, I had the misfortune to fall in with a gang of the biggest scoundrels that ever 'scaped a white jail."

"You don't say so?" exclaimed the marshal, now decidedly interested in the narrative.

"Yes, sir, boss fly! It is jest as I am a-telling you, and if it ain't true, every word of it, you kin knock me down for a liar!"

"And the gang went for you, eh?"

"Was it these fellows who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande?" Moreno asked.

"Them are the cusses w'ot got my plunder!" the man declared.

"They cleaned me out! I wish I may die if they didn't, and even took the mule, so I had to hoof it."

"We have got one of the gang in the calaboose now," the marshal remarked.

"So I heard, and that is w'ot brought me to town. I came on purpose to see that cuss, I did! I jest want to see if it is one of the gang that cleaned me out, and if it is, I want to jest let him know what I think of him."

Jackman laughed.

The idea seemed a ridiculous one to him.

"Waal, stranger, I reckon that won't get yer money nor your mule back."

"No, I don't s'pose it will, but it will be a heap of satisfaction for me to crow over the cuss a bit, you know."

"Yes, that is so."

"I kin say to him, aha, Mister Man, you are one of the galoots that got me foul and now you are foul yourself, and how do you like it? Oh, I tell yer, it will be a heap of satisfaction!"

"And if the feller is one of the gang when he comes to be tried you kin give evidence ag'in' him."

"You bet! that is what I am coming at! That is one of the reasons that fetched me hyer. If the cuss is one of the gang that 'clubbed me I kin sw'ar it in ag'in' him when he's put on trial."

"Come along down to the calaboose then and take a look at him," the marshal said.

"That is jest whar I was going to ax you to take me!" the stranger declared.

"I will go with you," Moreno remarked. "For I feel a curiosity to see if the man is one of the gang that robbed our friend here."

"Did he have a red glove on his left hand?" the Englishman asked.

"Yes."

"Then he is one of the crowd that got away with my wealth."

"I had an idea that this gentleman was on the right track," Moreno observed, "because I have not heard of any other band operating in this neighborhood besides the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande as they call themselves."

"That is it!" the big fellow exclaimed, "that is ther handle, and they let on that they consider they owned all this country along the Rio Grande hyer, and intended to collect toll from every galoot w'ot dared to travel over it."

"Waal, we have got one cuss hyer that I reckon won't collect much toll arter we git through with him!" the marshal remarked, grimly.

"Oh, jest you sock it to him! Put it to him all you know how!" the Englishman exclaimed. "Jest consider, gentle boys, a hundred good, solid chucks and a mule, worth a hundred more of any man's money. I tell yer it is enough to rile a man clean down to his gizzard!"

By this time the calaboose was reached. The jailer was summoned, and the errand of the stranger made known to him.

"I reckon he is barking up the right tree," Slab Kellogg remarked. "This cuss is a bad egg all the way through; but come in, gents, and take a look at the critter."

The three entered the jail. In the upper half of the door which led into the inner apartment there was a small window about a foot square, guarded by strong bars, and arranged so it could be closed with a sliding shutter.

Kellogg shoved back the shutter so that the window was exposed, and through it he called into the cell.

"Rouse up thar, you durned copper-colored, no-account galoot!" the jailer exclaimed. "Come to the windy hyer, and give this hyer man a chance to see what you look like!"

"Go to blazes!" retorted the half-breed, in sullen resentment.

"What's that?" cried the jailer, in a rage. "Don't dare to put on any frills, or I'll come in thar and kick the stuffin' outen you!"

"You jest h'ist up to this yere windy as quick as the Lord will let yer! Hyer's a man wants to have a squint at you—he's got a leetle business with you 'bout a hundred ducats and a mule."

"Don't know nuffin' 'bout no mule!" the prisoner declared.

"I reckon you are lying, and you know it, too!" the big fellow declared. "You don't dare to come to the window and let me see if you ain't the galoot what skinned me of my wealth and took my mule."

"I never saw you before," replied the half-breed, "and I ain't afeard to let you look at me."

And as he spoke he rose slowly from his recumbent position, and coming to the door peered through the grated window.

"That is the very identical, durned copper-colored galoot!" the big fellow cried, the moment he caught sight of the half-breed. "I could sw'ar to him on a stack of Bibles as big as a house! He had a mask over his face, but it only kivered one-half of it, and I could sw'ar to this galoot without ary bit of trouble! I say, boys, when are they going to hang this cuss?"

"I reckon you are in a durned hurry now," the marshal remarked. "This feller ain't tried yet."

"No use for to try him!" the stranger declared. "Any one could see that he was guilty by the cut of his jib."

"Say, let's get up a necktie-party and call upon Judge Lynch to string him up."

"Oh, no; we will let the law deal with him," Jackman rejoined.

"Wouldn't I like to make one of the lynch-party to put this galoot through a course of sprouts!" the big fellow exclaimed. "Jest rouse him up in the middle of the night, take him out and put a rope round his neck, and then, jest as we run him up to the tree, he would be begging and praying for his gang to come for to git him out of the scrape; but his gang wouldn't be near, you know, 'cos they wouldn't know that there was any little surprise-party of the kind. That would be fun, you bet! And how quick the cusses would come, though, if they knew that this red imp was out of the jail, and that one bold dash would be apt to help him out of the scrape!"

"You will never see me hanged, you big liar!" retorted the half-breed, defiantly, and with a peculiar light shining in his eyes.

"I have seen better men than you dance upon nothing!" the Englishman exclaimed. "Say, can't I get in to this fellow so as to pound him a bit?"

"Oh, no, that is ag'in' the rules."

"Waal, I will come and see you hung, anyway."

"Go to blazes!" the half-breed retorted, retreating from the window and again resuming his recumbent position on the buffalo-robes.

"I would like to whale him!" the big fellow remarked, as he quitted the prison in company with the marshal and Moreno.

"Oh, you couldn't do that, you know," the marshal said. "But don't you worry, stranger,

this copper-colored rooster will have a hard road to travel before he gits through."

The marshal had a great desire to give the man a hint in regard to the lynching scheme, but feared to trust such a secret to him.

"Gents, you must come in and have a drink with me," the man said when they approached the hotel.

Few men in Texas refuse such an invitation.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STRANGER BECOMES QUARRELSOME.

THE three walked into the bar-room of the hotel; the landlord was behind the counter serving a couple of customers, and the Lone Hand was reading a newspaper, seated by one of the windows.

One of the men at the bar was the principal sport of the town, Doc Mortimer, and the other was a rancher from down the Rio Grande, Colonel John Bellingham, a gentleman of a decidedly sportive turn of mind, and who never came to town without dropping into Doc Mortimer's place and risking some of his loose change in an attempt to cut the claws of the tiger.

On the present occasion he had managed to come out ahead—he never played but a couple of hours, whether he won or lost, being an odd, methodical genius—and he had insisted upon Doc coming over to the hotel and taking a drink with him to celebrate his victory.

The Lone Hand, being in the corner, had not been noticed by the colonel until after the liquor was dispatched, and the rancher was just expressing his regret to Doc Mortimer that he had not noticed the stranger when the others entered the apartment.

The Birmingham Infant marched up to the bar and brought his big fist down upon the counter with a whack which made the glasses jingle.

"This hyer is my 'shout!'" he exclaimed, "and I want all you gents to have something with me! I'm a man w'ot has seen a deal of life! I have been all around the world. I was in Californy and made my stake in the mines. I have fought the blacks in the Australian bush, and eaten roast hams with the cannibals down in the South Seas. I'm an old rounder and you kin bet high on it!"

"Blue ruin is my tippie, landlord, and put it out lively. W'ot'll you have, gents?"

All chose whisky, and the landlord, not understanding the English slang, pushed the bottle toward the Briton.

"No, no, blue ruin I said, and that means gin whar I was raised."

The bottle was produced, and then the big fellow happened to catch sight of the Lone Hand, deeply engaged in his newspaper, and apparently paying no attention to what was going on at the bar.

"Hello, stranger—you feller with the newspaper—come up and take something."

"Thank you, I shall be pleased," and the Arkansian laid aside his paper and advanced to the bar.

The Birmingham Infant surveyed him with considerable curiosity as he rose, displaying his muscular proportions.

"You are a pretty tolerable sizable chunk of a man," the Englishman remarked, in a rather ugly way, and the Lone Hand noticed the peculiar tone at once.

He had promptly accepted the invitation to drink, because down in this wild Southwest region it is considered discourteous to refuse, and the Arkansian understood this well enough, although from the manner in which the man entered he had got the idea that he was a local bully who would be apt to quarrel with any stranger upon slight provocation.

Now the Lone Hand, although he never hesitated to give a lesson to any man of this kind when he found that the fellow was determined to have it, yet he always avoided an encounter of this sort when it was possible.

So, on the present occasion, he merely smiled, as though he considered the remark to be a mere pleasantry, and said:

"Give me a little whisky."

"Better take gin—it is a heap sight better than whisky," the Birmingham Infant exclaimed, a little roughly.

"Every man to his taste; I don't care for gin," the Lone Hand replied.

"Do you mean to say that gin ain't better than your miserable whisky?" exclaimed the big fellow, angrily.

The rest looked at the man in astonishment, for it was plain now that he intended to pick a quarrel with the other.

"See here, don't talk that way to me, or there will be trouble," the Lone Hand exclaimed, sternly.

It was his idea always in such cases as this, to take the bull promptly by the horns. If the man wanted to quarrel he was prepared to meet him more than half-way.

"Trouble!" howled the big fellow, quickly working himself up into a fit of passion. "Waal now, you kin bet all you are worth that there will be trouble if you don't swaller yer gin right lively. Ye'r' a big enough galoot, but if you don't do w'ot I say, I will whale you right out of your boots."

"Oh, no, you are not man enough to do that," the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"Hold on, gentlemen, hold on!" exclaimed the landlord, anxious to prevent the fight from coming off in his place, for past experience had taught him that in such affrays his goods and chattels were apt to suffer.

"I really must protest against any trouble taking place here. If you two gentlemen want to settle this matter, why not adjourn to some quiet corral where you will have plenty of room and no danger of any interference."

"As it is here, as soon as you begin, you will have the whole town in, and then there will be the deuce to pay."

"Yes, there's a corral right back of the house," Moreno suggested. "We can go by the back way and so not attract any attention."

"That will suit me," the big fellow exclaimed. "I reckon I kin kill you anywhar!"

"I reckon you can't!" the Lone Hand replied.

"Say, you chap, jest show us the way!" the Englishman exclaimed to Moreno, "and if I don't make a holy show of this fellow inside of five minutes then I ain't the man I think I am."

"I do not believe you are; but after the fight you can get introduced to yourself," the Lone Hand observed, dryly.

And then they all proceeded to the corral at the back of the hotel.

The corral was a fenced-in yard some fifty feet square with a long shed at one end; the fence was a high one, made of rough slabs, and when the party were within the inclosure, with the gates closed, they were secure from observation.

The Lone Hand had little fear of the result of this encounter, for although he suspected from the fellow's talk that he was an English bruiser, yet the chances were a hundred to one that he was not a regular professional boxer, and if he was, he was entirely out of condition, being as fat as a hog, and his bloated face and projecting stomach betrayed that he had been indulging to excess for a long time in strong drinks, and no man can do this and be in a condition for a contest, which, more than any other practiced by humans calls into place every muscle of the body—makes great demand upon the wind, and, all in all, requires a man to be in the best physical condition, and this the Lone Hand was.

He was all bone and muscle; hardly an ounce of superfluous flesh upon him, and could not have been in any better condition for a contest of this kind if he had trained for it in true pugilistic style.

"Now, then, my Jack-a-dandy, jest strip off your harness and let me tan yer hide fer you!" the big fellow exclaimed in a boastful way, as he began to prepare for the contest by pulling off his pea-jacket.

"If you should happen to get the worst of the fight it would be apt to make you feel sick after all this boasting," the Lone Hand remarked, as he stripped off his blanket coat and began to roll up his shirt-sleeves.

And now that the antagonists were about ready to face each other, the spectators made a discovery which was a surprise to them. With his bulky pea-jacket on the stranger appeared to be an uncommonly big man, but now that the garment was removed he looked very much smaller, while his opponent, on the contrary, appeared to be almost as big without his coat as with it.

One man was clumsily built, so that he looked to be bigger than he was, while the other was so well-proportioned that his real size was concealed.

"Say, I reckon this galoot has bit off more than he will be able to chew," the marshal whispered in the ear of Moreno, as the removal of the coats revealed the true proportions of the two.

"This Mr. Hand strips amazingly large," Moreno remarked. "I never supposed he was so big."

"Oh, he is a big fellow, and no mistake!" the marshal exclaimed in admiration. "Jest look at them arms. Whew! ain't they pile-drivers? And see the breadth of his shoulder. Say, do you know, I believe he will weight forty or fifty pounds more than the other man, for he is a good two inches taller and more compactly built in every way, and look at the length of his arms! Durn me if I don't believe they are six inches longer than the other fellow's!"

"Yes, but I guess the other man is a practiced boxer and that will make a big difference, you know," Moreno replied.

"Mebbe he is," the marshal observed, and there was considerable doubt in his tone. "I don't know as I kin be reckoned a judge when it comes to these regular boxer chaps. I disremember ever seeing any of the tribe, but I have seen a good many tussles 'tween ordinary men, and I must say this Mister Hand squar's himself as if he knew what kind of job he was tackling, while the other galoot is as clumsy as an elephant."

This was the truth as Moreno could plainly see and he could not help admitting as much.

"He seems to be lighter on his feet, but I doubt if he can strike as powerful a blow as the

other; still I know but little of this fisticuff business," Moreno said.

"It is not to my taste. In my country we do not fight with fists, but weapons. I think the man has made a mistake that he did not choose pistols."

"Wal, I reckon from the way I heered that the Mister Hand got away with the road-agent that he is to home with the barkers too," the marshal rejoined.

A conversation extremely similar had taken place between the rancher and the sporting proprietor of the Big Texas Sandbank, but they were comparing the two men with the idea of getting up a little bet on the contest; but to their mutual disgust they ascertained when they came down to business that each wanted to bet on the same man.

Neither one was willing to back the Englishman.

"If this stranger knows any thing about boxing and from the way he handles himself I reckon he does, he will use this big bloot up completely inside of ten minutes," Doc Mortimer remarked. And the sport was a good judge of this sort of thing for he had stood by the ring side and witnessed many a well-contested battle.

"What odds will you give me that the Englishman don't last ten minutes?" the rancher asked.

"Fifty dollars to forty!" replied the sport, promptly.

"It's a go."

"Gentlemen, if you want me to, I will act as time-keeper and referee," Doc Mortimer said, taking out his watch. "When you are ready, say so!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CONTEST.

"I'm ready," said the Englishman, giving the final tightening to the belt he wore around his waist.

The Lone Hand had just done the same.

"So am I."

"Time then, gentlemen," the sport observed, watch in hand, and then, as the two men stepped forward to confront each other he said:

"By the way, what sort of fight is this to be? A regular ring battle or a rough and tumble after the Southwestern style?"

"According to the rules of the London P. R.," the Englishman responded.

"That is the only kind of fight that I know anything about, and you kin bet yer boots that I am a blooming tulip at that."

"All right, I am agreeable," the Lone Hand responded. "It does not make any difference to me. I am for you any way you want to have it!"

The tone of confidence in which the Arkansian spoke rather bothered the Englishman, for it seemed to indicate that the speaker had perfect confidence in his own powers.

It was not the tone of a braggart but that of a man who knew what he could do.

Tozer was not a regular professional boxer, although he pretended that he had been, but in the old country, during his youth, he had been a pot-boy—as the youths are called, who serve the liquid refreshments in the English "drums," as the sporting-houses are termed—and, naturally had picked up a thing or two in the boxing line, and this knowledge had served him well in his knocking around the world, for, as a rule, the men he had come in contact with in a fistic way had been sadly ignorant of the "manly art of self-defense."

But on this occasion, from the peculiar way in which his adversary carried himself, the Englishman, who flattered himself that he knew a boxer when he saw him, got the idea that his opponent understood how to handle his fists.

And this fact, coupled with the one that the Lone Hand when he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves presented as fine a physical development as he had ever seen, tended to make the man feel decidedly uneasy.

"Cuss the luck!" he muttered to himself, as he completed his preparations, "this 'ere bloke looks to be as big as a house! If he should happen to be clever with his mawleys now the chances are big, that I am in for a knock-out."

"Blow me tight! I would not have tried this on if I had had any idea that the galoot was so durned big. Why, he's a reg'lar Heenan, a young man too, while I am old and stale."

"I must try the rush game on him, and go in to pink him in short order or I won't do it at all."

"Come to the scratch—time!" ejaculated Doc Mortimer, perceiving that both of the contestants were prepared.

The Lone Hand looked the very picture of manly grace as he advanced, while the Englishman was clumsy and awkward.

Tozer came up slowly, as though he had no idea of making an attack, until he got almost within reach of his opponent, and then he made a sudden rush and struck half a dozen vicious blows in quick succession, which undoubtedly would have done considerable damage had they landed on the person of his opponent, but the Lone Hand was not taken by surprise, for he

had kept watch of the eyes of his foe, following the role of the skillful swordsman, and read therein the intention to attack before the assault was made so he was prepared for it.

He gave way before the advance, contented himself with parrying and dodging the clumsily-aimed blows of the Englishman, and then, when the other paused at last, out of breath from his violent efforts, he "measured" his man, "feinted" with his left at the head of the Englishman, and when the other, in haste, threw up his arms to guard his head, leaving his chest uncovered, he sent in his right with terrific force, catching Tozer just above the "mark" and knocking him completely off his feet.

Over backward went the man, coming down with a violent shock.

"First knock-down for Mr. Hand!" the Doc announced. "Time, one minute! Colonel!"—this aside to the rancher—"I'll go you a hundred to forty on the ten minutes!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF THE FIGHT.

BUT the colonel was not anxious to invest any more money, even at such odds.

He shook his head.

"Oh, no, Doc," he said. "No more in mine, if it is all the same to you. I am not much posted about this sort of thing, but it seems to me as if the big blower was going to be finished in short order."

"Holy smokes! wasn't that a pile-driver though! I reckon it would take a good many dollars to induce me to stand up and let that fellow bang me in that way."

"And yet our friend byer is doing it free, gratis, for nothing," the sport rejoined.

"You can bet your bottom dollar, Doc, that he didn't know what kind of a game he was chipping into," the colonel remarked.

"I reckon he has got his eyes open now," the sharp observed.

"If he hasn't, he is a darned sight duller than I take him to be!" the rancher exclaimed.

During this conversation the Englishman was being assisted to his feet by the landlord who had entered the corral just in time to witness the discomfiture of the bully, and as the Englishman fell right at his feet it was only natural that he should endeavor to aid him.

After his opponent was down the Lone Hand retreated a couple of yards, and folded his muscular arms across his broad chest.

His breath came a little bit quicker, but otherwise there were no signs that he had been indulging in any unusual physical exertion.

"Hello, old man, you are getting the worst of this!" the landlord ejaculated in the ear of the Englishman as he helped him to his feet.

"Durn me if I know how he did it," the other replied, sadly out of breath, and plainly betraying that he had been making great exertions.

"He is too much for you, I am afraid," the host observed.

"Oh, no, I reckon not; it was a chance blow anyway, and I kinder got my beels together so that I wasn't braced to receive a lick and that was how he came to floor me," the bully explained, not willing to admit that he was over-matched, although in his heart he knew it to be the truth.

The fellow was tolerably game though and he had not yet received punishment enough to make him cry enough.

"I made a mistake in trying a rash game on him," the man continued. "I have got a deal too much fat on me to dance 'round much, and that is where he got the best of me, you see."

"I was fool enough to run arter him, and then when he got me winded, why a little poke sent me over."

In this way did Tozer speak of the terrific crack which, when it had struck, seemed for the moment to fairly knock the life out of him.

"Will two minutes between the rounds be enough for you, gentlemen?" Doc Mortimer inquired.

"That will suit me," the Lone Hand replied.

"All right; it will do for me too!" exclaimed the Englishman, who had by this time recovered his wind.

"Time!" called out the sport a half-a-minute later.

The Lone Hand promptly put himself in position, but the Englishman was slow in coming to the scratch.

As Doc Mortimer remarked in the ear of the rancher:

"You can just bet he is doing a heap of thinking now. That lick in the bread-basket has set him to speculating as to the best way to get at his man."

"He is a leetle mixed, you see, for he has made the discovery that it is a tough job he has tackled, and he hasn't made up his mind as to which is the best way to do the trick."

"Well, now I reckon you are a good judge of this sort of thing," the colonel remarked, "what do you think would be the best thing for him to do?"

"Throw up the sponge and give it up," replied the sport, immediately. "He doesn't stand any more chance to whip his man than a hawk would to get away with an eagle. He is out-

classed and over-matched in every way. 'Nary bit of business has he with such a fighter as this fellow, who strips as well as any man I ever saw in the ring. He is another Tom Ilyer, whom I saw spar when I was a kid, the best man that ever stepped foot in a ring in America, bar none before or after him!"

The two men were within reach, and as they began to spar it put an end to the conversation.

The Lone Hand saw immediately that his antagonist had profited by the lesson which he had received, and did not intend to try another rush, but as it was his game to force the Englishman to move around so as to get him out of breath, thus taking advantage of the other being altogether unfit for a contest of this kind, he proceeded to attack.

He was as light and quick upon his legs as a featherweight, and fairly danced around the Englishman in a manner which completely astonished that worthy.

The Briton was compelled to exert himself and for about a minute the Lone Hand kept him busy, making him shift his ground rapidly so as to ward off threatened blows, which, in reality, were only feints.

Then the Lone Hand, with a true boxer's cunning, apparently left an "opening" exposed, and the Englishman hastened to get home a tremendous blow, but his opponent, with a laugh, drew back his head, calculating the distance so well that the Briton's blow stopped within an inch of his nose, and then, to the amazement of the bystanders, before the Englishman could withdraw his arm, the Lone Hand banged his antagonist twice, right and left, the cracks so sharp that they resounded on the air, and then he jumped back out of distance.

The Englishman was infuriated by this treatment; smarting under the punishment he forgot his caution, and rushed madly after his foe.

One idea only in his mind, to get hold of his antagonist and kill him.

The Lone Hand was prepared for just such a movement as this, for it had been his game to provoke the other to make it, and as the Englishman rushed at him, forgetting all that he ever knew of boxing, he braced himself, and with his massive, iron-like right fist, smote his antagonist between the eyes.

It is an old pugilistic maxim that the most powerful blow a boxer can strike is the one which catches the man upon whom it falls in a rush, for the force of the stroke is doubled.

It is the same as the two engines at full speed coming together; the shock is enormous!

And in this case the blow fairly made the Englishmen see stars, and over he went, coming to the ground with tremendous force.

"A second knock-down for Mr. Hand," observed Doc Mortimer. "Time, including wait, five minutes!"

"Say, sport"—this aside to the colonel, "I will go you a hundred to ten that he knocks him out inside of five minutes more."

"Doc, I reckon you are trying to play the hog in this game!" the rancher exclaimed, in mild reproof. "To ask a man to bet on this English duffer now would be about as bad as to request him to throw hisducats into the Rio Grande with the expectation of being able to whistle them back."

"Colonel, you have not the sand, I regret to say, which I have always given you credit for possessing!" Doc declared, in saddened accents.

"Go 'way! you want to skin a man alive!" the colonel retorted. "This is worse than a brace game of faro. You ought to be willing to give a man some show for his money."

"A show to be struck by lightning," murmured the sport, softly, half to himself.

"Yes, that is about the way it is in this case! It is an old joke, but it fits mighty keen!" the rancher declared.

As before, the landlord hastened to assist the fallen man to his feet, but this time it was fully a minute before the Englishman recovered from the effect of the shock, for besides the crushing weight of the blow, he had hit the back of his head violently against the hard earth when he came down.

Then it was almost another minute before he got on his legs, and he would not have been able to rise if it had not been for the landlord's helping hand, and when he got upon his legs he was so shaky he could hardly stand, and had to lean upon Plunkett.

"I will have to make a mistake and give this fellow three minutes this time," the sport observed to the rancher. "The two minutes are about up now, and he is in no condition to come to the scratch. That will make eight minutes, so you see you will have a chance to win, for the other fellow will only have two minutes to finish him in."

"Oh, what are you giving me, Doc?" exclaimed the colonel in a disgusted sort of way. "Do you suppose I haven't got my eyes? What is the use of trying to fool an old man like I am? The fellow is finished already! I doubt if he comes to the scratch again, and if he does, the other will lay him out instanter, for he is as fresh as a daisy."

This was the truth, although the exertion which he had made in the last round had made

the breath of the Lone Hand come a trifle quicker and harder.

"Great Scott! old man, you got it that time!" the landlord exclaimed in the ear of the bully.

"I—I am done for," the other whispered in a husky voice, hardly able to speak.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, all gone."

"Oh, no, brace up and take another hack at him; he is winded too."

The landlord knew that this was not the truth, and only said it to encourage the other.

"No, no, he's all right, but I'm played; anybody could whip me now. I thought the job would be an easy one, but I never tackled such a tough nut before."

"Time!" cried Doc Mortimer at this point.

The Lone Hand advanced, promptly.

"I have got enough, I am a whipped man and can't come to the scratch," observed the Englishman, doggedly.

By this time he had recovered so as to be able to stand without the landlord's assistance.

"It is your inning this time," he continued, "but you kin bet your life that the hour will come when I will have mine. I have got it in for you, and if I can't down you with my fists, I kin with a weapon."

"I am your man at any game you choose to play," the Lone Hand replied, as the Englishman took his pea-jacket and slunk away.

"Colonel, you are 'left' and yet it is not a cold day!" the sport declared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PLOTTERS.

AFTER the departure of the Englishman the rest returned to the hotel and in consideration that he had won the only bet which had been made upon the fight, Doc Mortimer insisted upon standing treat, and the colonel took pains to explain that in his mind there had never been the least doubt as to how the contest would end, and all he had bet upon was the length of the fight.

"When you consider," he said, "that these professional pugilists will battle all the way from one to three or four hours, it did not seem to be possible that a big ruffian like this Englishman could be settled in ten minutes."

"The man was no match for me," the Lone Hand remarked; "he is old, stale, as they say in the language of the prize-ring, all out of condition, loaded down with fat, and what physical strength he had possessed weakened by long indulgence in all sorts of dissipation."

The refreshments were disposed of; the Lone Hand returned to his newspaper; the sport and the rancher departed. Moreno also sauntered out, and as the barkeeper came in just at that moment, it afforded the landlord a chance to join the young man on the street.

Moreno stood at the further corner of the house leaning against one of the pillars, supporting the piazza, which extended along the front of the hotel.

Moreno was rolling a cigarette in the Mexican fashion as the landlord came up to him and he tendered him one.

Plunkett accepted, the cigarettes were lit, and the two smoked away, apparently killing time; in reality though they were discussing important matters.

"Well, what do you think of this affair?" Moreno asked.

"I think the man was a fool to try it on," the landlord replied. "But he is one of those bull-headed Englishmen into whose nodole it is impossible to get any sense without hammering it in."

"He got well hammered to-day."

"Bah! he stood no chance at all."

"Not the slightest, and I had a suspicion that it would be so from the very beginning, but, as you say, the fellow was obstinate and wanted to play his own game."

"Well, he got a lesson this time, but I don't believe it will do him much good."

"I don't know about that," Moreno rejoined.

"The next time he has a job like this on hand he will not be likely to depend upon his fists."

"I should have advised a weapon."

"So I did, but the man was so confident in his abilities as a fist fighter that he actually talked of killing his man with his fists alone."

"Is it possible? the fool!" exclaimed Plunkett, contemptuously.

"Yes, or at any rate, he would hammer him so that he would not be of any use to himself or anybody else for a month or two."

"Now if he had only waited until night and depended upon a revolver or upon a nice, quiet knife-thrust," the landlord remarked.

"Yes, that is what I suggested, but the fellow was so certain he could do the trick that I let him try it."

"He was coming to the town anyway to warn Comanche Joe to be on the lookout tonight, and said it would not be any trouble for him to lay out this stranger at the same time."

"Well, the trick has failed, and that is all there is to it. Some other game must be tried."

"If he joins the lynchers to-night—and I don't suppose there is the least doubt but what

he will, the chances are long that when the dash is made, during the confusion, there will be an opportunity to put a knife into him, or end his career with a revolver shot."

"Yes, yes, it ought to be accomplished easily enough."

"But I say, what do you think of him?"

"He is a mystery," replied Plunkett, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Have you tried to pump him?"

"Yes."

"Any information?"

"Mighty little; he is a speculator—his name is Hand, and he is down here looking for chances to make money."

"Yes, that is what he said before; but if he is a man with money to invest, what is he doing traveling around the country on foot?"

"Very true."

"Men with money to invest don't usually travel in that way."

"Not much!"

"It looks to me as if he was a spy, and on the track of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

"So it does."

"It was natural for this Webster to be hoofing it from Brackett down here, because he was without money, and could not afford to come in any other way; but there was no necessity for this Hand to come on foot if, as he says, he is a speculator, with money to invest. Besides, he has not been in Brackett at all."

"Is that so?"

"I saw one of our men from there this afternoon, and when I described Hand to him he was positive that no such man had been in the town lately."

"From what direction did he come, then?"

"Down the Rio Grande, evidently following right in the track of the Red Glove Raiders."

"Upon my soul it looks like it!"

"But now the question is, who and what is the man—is he an army officer in disguise?"

"He seems like a soldier—he certainly has a military bearing," the landlord remarked.

"Or is he some bloodhound employed by the Governor of the State?"

"That may be probable."

"By the way, a company of State rangers has been ordered into this district."

"The deuce they have!" exclaimed Plunkett, evidently startled by the intelligence.

"Yes, that was why our man from Brackett came down. The moment he heard the news he came to warn me."

"The movement is being kept a profound secret; but our man heard the dispatch as it passed over the wires. I instructed him to keep his ears open and watch the telegraph."

"It was wise," Plunkett remarked with an approving nod.

"Now then, has this movement of the rangers anything to do with the presence of this mysterious stranger in Pedrovilla?" Moreno asked.

"Well, that is a difficult question to answer; it certainly seems, though, as if there was a connection between the two. When the rangers come, what will be the game of the Red Glove Raiders?"

"To draw the troops into an ambush, and give them such a beating as will fill the country around with terror," Moreno answered, fiercely.

The landlord shook his head.

"Bad policy, I think, for when that is done the country will be made so hot that another move will have to be made."

"Exactly, that is the calculation. By that time the cow will be milked, and there will no longer be a reason for the band remaining here."

"Ah, in that case, then it might do. By the way, I made the inquiries you spoke of."

"Yes?"

"The girl has been fooling you. Jack Hamilton, far from losing money, has been making it, hand over fist."

"Is that possible?" asked Moreno with an ugly frown.

"Not a doubt of it! I have it right from men who know what they are talking about. He is one of the richest ranchers in the county."

"How about Aldama?"

"Oh, he is well fixed, too, but no better than Jack Hamilton. Either one of them is worth close to a million apiece, at the lowest estimate."

"I had a suspicion at the time that the cunning minx had penetrated my purpose and was deceiving me," Moreno remarked, thoughtfully.

"There is little choice as far as money goes between the two girls," the landlord observed.

"Yes, but there is a deuced sight between the two personally," Moreno replied.

"Cordelia Hamilton is too sharp to suit me; I detest these smart girls! Now the other, Mercedes Aldama, is all love and sweetness, and I would rather have her with half a million than the Hamilton girl with ten."

"Yes; but, my dear fellow, you are surely not thinking of marrying and settling down?" the landlord exclaimed, as though he was annoyed at the idea.

"Well, I don't know; it is a subject, of course, that requires serious thought," Moreno replied.

"I have been tolerably successful in this life

which I have been leading, but then it is one, you know, that a man cannot hope to always follow. The man must make an end of it sometime, or else fate will be certain to do it for him."

"There is an old saying, you know, that the pitcher that goes often to the well will be broken at last."

"Yes, and I reckon there is a deal of truth in that."

"Now, then, if the rangers didn't arrive so quickly as to interfere with business, there is a chance of making some good hauls in this district, and after the money is secured, if I could succeed in winning Mercedes Aldama I know a nice interior district in Mexico where, if a man has plenty of money he can live like a fighting-cock, and even if there is a suspicion that he has led a rather wild life the people will think no less of him for it."

"I suppose the majority of them have been in the same boat," Plunkett observed.

"Very likely. That is the game I think I shall play."

"But if this stranger is not disposed of there may be trouble."

"Oh, yes, I understand that, and he must be got out of the way. It may be possible, you know, that he is acting on his own hook; there is a large reward offered for the capture of any of the Red Glove Raiders."

"I sounded him on that, and hinted that it would be a good speculation for a daring man to go into."

"But he didn't betray himself?"

"Not in the slightest degree," replied the landlord, emphatically.

"Oh, he is a deep fellow. Another supposition—he may be the agent of private vengeance. The band may have slain some one near and dear to him."

"Very true."

"Whatever the motive, I feel sure he's a bloodhound, and he must die."

"And the other?"

"Webster?"

"Yes."

"He is harmless, and will not be troubled unless he becomes dangerous, which is not likely. Well, adieu; I must be off to prepare for the night."

And with a graceful salute, Moreno departed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE HOTEL.

THE shades of night gathered over Pedrovilla.

Like the majority of towns on the frontier the place was a great deal more lively by night than by day, for the ranchers and their men for twenty miles around came into the town, for the purpose of securing supplies, hearing the news, and whiling away a few hours in one of the saloons.

The Lone Hand found himself the lion of the night, much to his amusement, for he had no anticipation of such a thing.

As his victory over the big fellow had been witnessed by only a few people, he had no idea that all the particulars of the affair would so soon become the property of the citizens.

But the marshal, who, as the reader will remember, had been one of the spectators, although, contrary to his usual custom, had kept very quiet, yet after the contest was over he made amends for his unusual silence by relating the particulars of the battle with great gusto to every man he met.

And like all good stories it lost nothing in the telling, so by the time the marshal had narrated the yarn half a dozen times, and had a drink with each man to whom he told it, "Mister Hand" was described by the loose-tongued marshal as possessing muscular powers second only to Samson of old, and if there had been any wild beasts handy, no doubt the marshal would have volunteered to go out and catch one so that the stranger could give an exhibition of his strength by rending his rugged jaws asunder.

One result of the marshal's story-telling was that after a couple of hours some of his friends had to take him to the hotel, where he had a room, by means of a convenient shutter and put him to bed.

Thereafter the marshal was invisible until about nine o'clock, when he made his appearance, feeling particularly "rocky," as he expressed it.

But he had put the tale of the Lone Hand's prowess in circulation though, and as it was something out of the common run it spread like wildfire; and by nightfall it was pretty widely known for twenty miles around.

As a result, almost every man, as soon as he came to town, hurried to the hotel to get a look at the champion.

And with the majority of men the process of interviewing "the best fighting-man" that had ever struck the town of Pedrovilla was as follows:

Enter the rancher into the bar-room of the hotel—a glance around among the crowd assembled there, and then an advance on the bar.

"Say, colonel!"—leaning over the bar, confidentially to the landlord—"whar's the cuss w'ot whipped that feller so keen in the corral?"

"Sho! you don't say so; that galoot over thar in the blanket-coat? Why, he ain't much bigger than I am, but he's a hummer from Hummer-ville!"

Then a dive at the Lone Hand.

"Say, stranger, how ar' ye? I'm Bill Smith, I am, from up Pedro Crick, got as nice a ranch up thar as thar is in the State! You have jest got fur to come and stay a while with me, you bet! I heerd how you warmed that English cuss—haw, haw! Wot'll you drink?"

The Lone Hand accepted the hospitality of three men before he awoke to the fact that there was a great probability that the three would soon be twenty or thirty, and then he made a hasty retreat.

He said he was going down the street to Doc Mortimer's place, the Big Texas Sandbank, but this was only a ruse to throw his admirers off the track for after passing through the main entrance of the saloon, he went round to the side door, and up to his room, where he remained until the Bostonian came in about eleven o'clock.

"The marshal has been hunting for you all over town," Webster said, as he entered.

"Indeed, and what does he want?"

"To post you regarding the lynch business to-night."

"Ah, yes."

"I told him that you were probably up-stairs, and that if I didn't come down, to come up, so he will be along pretty soon."

And then Webster helped himself to a chair and blurted out, abruptly:

"Do you know, I think this lynch business that they intend to carry out to-night is one of the most cowardly pieces of work that I ever heard of! The idea of lugging out that unfortunate half-breed, putting a rope around his neck, and stringing him up to the limb of a tree, for the purpose of choking a confession out of him!"

"Why, it is just the same idea as the old-time torture when they put a man on the rack or turned the thumb-screws on him."

"Yes, you are right; it is just about the same idea."

"Of course, in this case, I do not suppose there is much doubt that the man does belong to this outlaw band and could reveal some of their secrets if he chose so to do," Webster observed, thoughtfully.

"Very little doubt; in fact, none at all to my thinking."

"But, supposing there was a doubt—suppose the fellow was an innocent man, unjustly accused?"

"The chances are great that they would go ahead at the same gait."

"That is what I supposed, and it seems to me that the whole proceeding is barbarous in the extreme!" the Bostonian declared, indignantly.

"It certainly is; but you must take into consideration that this is a rough country down here—on the borders of civilization, and the means and processes that obtain in old and well regulated communities, would not be effectual here in restraining the wild and reckless men who set the law at defiance."

"Desperate diseases require desperate remedies, you know."

"Very true, but I cannot say that I admire living in such a community."

"A man in this world who follows fortune will often traverse a rough and rude path," the Lone Hand observed, with the air of a philosopher, "and so long as he attains the end he seeks he ought not to murmur at the discomforts of the way."

"I suppose you are right, but if I had any idea of what the country was like, I don't think I would have come down here. I should prefer less money and more civilization."

At this point there was a knock at the door.

"I guess that is the marshal."

"Come in," said the Lone Hand.

Webster's thought was correct.

It was the marshal.

"I came to post you in regard to the leetle surprise-party to-night," he said, with a good-natured grin.

"Ah, yes," the Lone Hand observed.

"We will meet at twelve o'clock, in a corral, just this side of the calaboose. It is off the street, 'tween the calaboose and the furst house this side of it."

"I think I noticed the corral to-day."

"Oh, you can't miss it!" the marshal asserted. "A man could almost find it with his eyes shut. It is going to be a good night for the fun. The moon is coming up strong—pretty near full, too, so, 'round 'bout midnight, there will be plenty of light."

"That is good."

"Oh, yes, we want to be able to see what we are about, you know. You will have to have your face kivered," and the marshal drew from his pocket some masks, rudely fashioned out of black cloth.

He selected two out of the number and passed them to the Lone Hand, who gave one to the Bostonian.

"I reckoned to only have 'bout ten or a dozen men in this scrape, but I am afeard

thar will be twenty or thirty," the marshal remarked.

"How is that?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Wal, I commenced to pick out my men 'bout ten o'clock, and warned them not to say a word to anybody, 'cos I didn't want the hull town thar; but I reckon, from what I see'd, that every galoot of them is going to ring a friend in, and some of 'em, mebbe, will bring two."

"You see, when you come to strike a picnic of this kind, it is mighty hard for the boys to keep from giving it away."

"That is natural."

"Yes, 'tain't often they get a chance for fun."

"I should not think there would be much fun in torturing this poor devil!" Webster exclaimed, unable to resist speaking.

"That's because you ar' a stranger hyer and ain't posted 'bout galoots like this half-breed," the marshal replied, with a pitying smile at the ignorance of the young man.

"Lord bless yer! if he and his gang got you up in the mountains, they would put you through a course of sprouts which would make your hair turn gray."

"They are worse than any red imps that you ever heerd tell on!"

"When they carry a man off and hold him for ransom, as they call it, if his friends don't pony up the money mighty quick, they jest slice off one of his fingers, or an ear, mebbe, and send it in to whar he used ter live, as a perlte intimation that they ar' in a hurry, and if the man's friends don't want to get the fellow back in pieces, they had better put up the cash."

"It is horrible!" the Bostonian exclaimed.

"Horrible! I bet yer! And when you git one of these red-handed murderers in yer power and chin about being merciful to him, why, you might jest as well say that a man ought to show mercy to a rattlesnake coiled ready for to strike him!"

"Wal, I'll see you later. So-long!" and the marshal departed.

"I have heard these tales, but I can hardly bring myself to believe they can be true," Webster remarked, after the door closed behind Jackman's burly form.

"He has not exaggerated in the least," the Lone Hand replied. "A more merciless set of bloodthirsty scoundrels than these brigands of the Rio Grande the world never saw!"

"It is hardly a wonder, then, that when they capture one of the members of such a gang they feel inclined to sock it to him, as a Texan would say."

"They would be more than human if they didn't," the other observed.

"By the way, it is a fortunate thing for us that there is going to be more than ten or a dozen in the party, for then our absence will not be noticed."

"That is true."

"Yes, among twenty or thirty men all masked, the absence of a couple will not be apt to cause remark."

"By the way, I bought an extra pair of revolvers to-day, for I thought they would prove useful for you to-night."

"They will, undoubtedly."

The Lone Hand produced the weapons, which were fine ones, navy size, charged them carefully, and gave the pair to the Bostonians.

Then he examined his own weapons, saw that they were properly loaded and in good working order.

A little after eleven the Lone Hand suggested that it would be as well for them to be on the move, and they departed from the hotel by the rear door so as not to excite observation and remark.

CHAPTER XXV.

TIME, MIDNIGHT.

AFTER leaving the hotel, the pair avoided the main street, making a *detour* into the open country, getting so far away from the houses that they would not be likely to be seen by any one.

As the marshal had said, the moon was coming up full and strong, and so there was plenty of light to enable the pair to see where they were going.

Thanks to the precautions which they had adopted in forsaking the street, they did not encounter a soul on their way.

When they arrived in the rear of the calaboose, they recognized the building without trouble, as it was so much larger than any of the houses in the immediate neighborhood.

"That long, low, dark line just this side of the calaboose is the corral evidently," said the Lone Hand, calling his companion's attention to it.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Not that it matters much to us whether it is or not," the other remarked, "for we will not have any business there to-night."

"That is true."

"Now we will begin to draw in toward the road, and we must keep our eyes about us, for the outlaws may already be in ambush, and if they discovered our presence in the neighborhood, it would upset our plans."

"Undoubtedly."

"Still, I hardly think that there is much danger of their being on the ground thus early."

"The lynchers are summoned to meet at twelve, and it will probably be fully half an hour after midnight before they will be ready to advance on the calaboose; then there will be a delay there, so it will be safe to calculate that it will be near one before they get the half-breed to the tree where they intend to swing him up."

"Your calculation is correct to my thinking."

"Yes; and as these outlaws, I am satisfied, are just as well posted in regard to these particulars as we, the probabilities are that they will not reach their ambush until after twelve, so we will have ample time to get to our hiding-place without danger of detection."

"Yes; but do you really think that they do know these particulars?" Webster asked.

"Are you not giving them credit for being smarter than they are?"

"Oh, no, circumstances have been such that I have been able to make a study of these outlaw bands during the last year, and one of the principal things with them is to have an excellent spy system."

"Without their spies in the different towns and villages near their haunts they would not know where to strike their blows, and would also be in danger of being surprised by the rangers, who are generally ordered to disperse any band whose exploits become notorious."

"I feel pretty certain that I have spotted two of the Red Glove Raiders' spies in this very town of Pedroville."

"I think I can guess the man at whom your suspicion is directed, although the idea seems almost too improbable for belief."

"This Jacob Plunkett, the landlord of the hotel and your employer, the old Jew."

"It does not seem possible!"

"I have seen enough of the way the outlaws work their games to know that it is both possible and probable."

"Both men get well paid for any services they may render, and they also act as 'fences' for disposing of stolen property; any goods which cannot be easily identified this old Jew would get rid of. Of course, on such stuff his profit would be great, for he gets the articles for a tenth of their value."

"You see, both of the men are careful not to run any risk."

"Why, to give you an idea of the way one of these first-class bands do business, it is my belief that fellow who provoked me into a fight to-day was one of the outlaws."

"Do you think it possible?" cried the Bostonian astonished at the statement.

"Indeed I do!" the Lone Hand answered, firmly. "The idea occurred to me the moment I saw that the man intended to pick a quarrel with me."

"If he had been under the influence of liquor it would have been a different matter, for drunken men will quarrel with a stranger without reason, but the fellow was sober enough, and I felt certain he had been set on to attack me, and that was the reason I accommodated him so quickly."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Webster, amazed, "do you know that it seems to me that you jump to your conclusions by instinct, for, I confess, I cannot reason them out the way you do."

"Not instinct, but long practice in reading men," the Lone Hand replied.

"For a good many years now I have studied men as a hunter studies the habits and natures of the game he tracks."

"By the bruised blade of grass, the overturned pebble, trifles, that to the eyes of the man unskilled in woodcraft would seem as naught, he learns what game has passed that way and how near he is to it."

"So it is with me; I have studied outlaws, like these Red Glove Raiders, until I am able from slight clues to penetrate their secrets and divine their plans."

By this time the pair were in the rear of the cabin where they designed to take refuge.

"Now, we must use all possible caution for fear that some of the outlaws may be in the neighborhood," the Lone Hand said in a whisper.

"We must crouch low and glide like a couple of ghosts with noiseless steps until we reach the cabin."

"I will do the best I can, although I doubt if I can do the Indian business as well as you," the Bostonian remarked.

"I reckon we are safe from observation, but we must be cautious. In a game of this kind never throw a chance away."

And then, with noiseless steps, the two stole toward the cabin.

When they reached the shelter of the shrubbery which clustered around the back of the house, they came to a halt and the Lone Hand listened intently.

Naught but the common noises of the night broke the silence.

"We have succeeded, I think," he said. "There does not seem to be a soul in the neighborhood."

He tried the cabin door; there was no lock, only a single latch upon it, for the old hunter had nothing within that he feared to lose.

They entered the cabin; within was only a single room, and a window looked out upon the road.

It was but a hole cut in the slabs, guarded by a shutter. The Lone Hand opened the shutter, and they commanded a view of the road.

"A splendid ambush!" exclaimed the man-hunter.

CHAPTER XXVI. IN AMBUSH.

THE cabin was extremely favorably situated for the purposes of the ambushed pair, for the moon was rising behind it so that the front of the building was in the shadow, while the full rays of the queen of night fell upon the ruined cabin on the opposite side of the road, and the jungle-like thicket of bushes which almost surrounded it, where the Lone Hand supposed the outlaws would find a hiding-place.

The man-hunter called the Bostonian's attention to this fact, and Webster saw at once how favorable it was for them.

"We, being in the shade, are secure from observation," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Any one even passing along the road fifteen or twenty feet from the house, would not be apt to detect our presence here, if we were careful to keep a little back from the window in the gloom of the room."

"No, the man would have to possess sharp eyes indeed."

"But with our game, the outlaws, if they take refuge in the neighborhood of the old ruined cabin yonder, as I feel sure they will, they must be closely hid indeed to keep us from seeing them."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

"It would be the most natural thing in the world, you know, for the rascals, after they get into position, to send one of their number out as a sort of sentry to give warning of the approach of the lynchers."

"I should judge that would be so."

"Yes, for it is impossible for them to suspect that there is any one in the neighborhood playing the spy upon them, for there is no other house near but this one, and you can rest assured the fellows before they selected the spot yonder for an ambushade took pains to ascertain all the particulars in regard to this place, and know the owner is absent."

"I see. The most astonishing thing to me is the confidence with which you predict what course of action these outlaws will take, while I am totally at a loss in the matter."

"You are not used to playing the game," the Lone Hand replied with a smile. "And then, too, apart from the skill which comes from experience, a man must possess a natural talent for the occupation."

"Is it not a fact that good judges agree that the most of the great generals who have written their names high on the roll of fame, owed their success to the fact that they succeeded in guessing what their opponents were going to do, before they did it, and took measures to defeat their plans?"

"I presume it is."

"In the game of war the man who succeeds best in guessing his opponent's plans will undoubtedly win, other things being even, and in this matter in which we are engaged upon, the same rule holds good."

"Yes, we have undoubtedly secured an important advantage if things turn out as you expect," the young man remarked.

"But, I say, what is our game—what are we to do when the outlaws make a dash to rescue the half-breed? Are we to make an appearance and help the citizens to beat them off?"

"Oh, no, there isn't any chance of doing that," the Lone Hand replied.

"The Red Glove Raiders will undoubtedly be all mounted, and there will probably be a good number of them, ten or fifteen—possibly twenty, for reports say the band is a large one, and when a well-armed force of that number, composed of desperate men, make a dash upon a mob of citizens it is certain that the citizens will be quickly stampeded, and there is not much probability that many of them will attempt to offer any resistance."

"Their motto will be, let each man look out for himself and the devil take the hindmost!"

"Yes, I presume the thing will resolve itself into a foot-race the moment the outlaws appear, for the attack will be certain to render the mob panic-stricken."

"There is a deal of difference between stringing one helpless man up to a tree, and giving battle to a dozen or two of well-armed desperadoes."

"No doubt about that!" Webster exclaimed.

"Our game is to keep quiet until the citizens are in full flight, the half-breed rescued and the outlaws set out to retreat; then, as they pass by the window here, we will open fire on them—not aim at the men, but at the horses, so as to disable as many as we can."

"Of course, these men are red-handed outlaws with a price set upon their heads—their lives are forfeited to the law, and yet, for all that, I do not care to kill them in cold blood, without they were attacking me and it was their lives or mine."

"You have expressed my opinions on the subject exactly," the Bostonian remarked. "But then I am an Eastern man, and was not educated to hold life as lightly as do the men down in this region."

"We will spare the men but disable the horses; that will dismount the riders, and there is a fine chance we may be able to secure some prisoners."

"But I say, have you calculated that these fellows may turn their attentions to us and storm our castle here?"

"Oh, yes, I have considered all that. I seldom fail to calculate all the advantages and disadvantages of the situation," the Lone Hand replied. "There is a stout bar upon the door. Did you not notice that I put it up after we entered?"

"Yes, now that you recall the circumstance, I remember that you did."

"The window, then, is the only way by which the rascals can succeed in entering the house, and how many of them do you think could manage to get through this opening, with you on one side and I on the other, protected by the darkness from their shots?"

"Not a man, of course!" the Bostonian answered, promptly.

"We could lay them out as fast as they made their appearance!"

"Yes, particularly as the window is only big enough to allow one man to get through it at a time, so you see there is not the slightest danger of our being caught in a trap."

"Hush!" said the Lone Hand abruptly in a cautious whisper, "I thought I heard a sound then, and it seemed to come from the shrubbery over yonder."

"Is the hammer of either of your revolvers raised?"

"No."

"Do not attempt to cock them then, for the click of the lock would be sure to reach the ears of the outlaws if they have arrived at their ambush yonder, and I think they have, for it is time they were on the ground; it must be near midnight."

"Yes, it cannot be far from that hour."

"My revolvers are double-acting tools, self-cockers, you know, so that if a struggle should be suddenly forced upon us I am prepared for it."

"We must be careful not to make a sound, for these outlaws usually have ears as keen as animals, the result of the wild life they lead."

"I will be cautious."

"If they send out a scout he may get the notion to take a look in through this window, and if we see him approaching we must lie down on the floor at full length alongside of the front wall with our faces to the floor, and the odds are great that in the darkness will not be discovered."

"And if we are?"

"We must settle the man," responded the Lone Hand, grimly. "Lay him out on the spot without mercy, even though it brings all the rest of the gang down upon us. But don't you leave me to make the first move."

"All right, I will do just as you say."

"Hush! there is some one moving around the ruined house yonder."

With straining eyes they peered forth, trying to penetrate the shadows that the shrubbery cast around the ruined cabin.

With bated breath they watched—the silence so intense that to each man's ears came the sound of his heart's beat, strong and clear.

Then, from amid the shadows which hung so heavy around the old house, came the dark figure of a man.

He advanced with the noiseless tread of a wild beast of prey into the moonlit road, and then he halted, gazed up and down, inclining his ear first one way and then the other to listen.

The watchers had a full view of him.

He was a good-sized fellow, with a dark and evil-looking face, dressed in the Mexican costume and armed to the teeth.

"Do you recognize him?" the Lone Hand asked cautiously.

"Yes, I think I do," Webster replied. "Is he not the man that fled when he came to the rescue of Aldama and Moreno?"

"The very same! You see my surmise in regard to the outlaws was correct. They are in ambush yonder and they intend to rescue the half-breed from the hands of the lynchers."

"Well, I shall not feel particularly sorry if they do succeed in astonishing the citizens," the Bostonian remarked.

"This lynch business is a pet scheme of Marshal Jackman, and I think he is about the biggest blow-hard I ever encountered. He needs a lesson, and I guess he will get it to-night."

"Hush! the Mexican has got his eyes on this cabin. I think he has an idea of looking in here—he has drawn his revolver—down with you—quietly—the slightest noise now would lead to a discovery."

The Bostonian was no clumsy fellow, and so he sank to the floor without making any noise.

The Lone Hand remained on the watch for a few moments later, until he was satisfied that the Mexican really intended to take a look at

the cabin, for he was advancing toward it with a cat-like tread, then he drew one of his revolvers, so as to be ready for action in case of a discovery, and crouched on the floor, flattening his body against the front wall of the building.

The outlaw had no suspicions that anything was wrong, and it was only as a matter of precaution that he took it into his head to examine the cabin.

He stole with noiseless tread up to the window, and peered into the room.

Dark as it was, he managed to see that there wasn't any one sleeping on the rude bunk in the corner, the cover of which was composed of gray wolf-skins, and the dark figure of a man would have been outlined against such a background.

Shrewd and cunning as was the Mexican, he never thought to look underneath the window for a lurking foe.

His scouting was confined to seeing whether the owner of the cabin was at home or not.

"It is all right," the outlaw muttered, after he had peered into the cabin and seen that the bunk was unoccupied. "The captain said the old man would not be here, but it is always best to be on the safe side, and so I thought I would be sure he was not at home. The coast is clear, and we will be able to teach these dogs of Pedroville that it will be wise for them in the future to keep their hands off the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

"I hope that infernal stranger who put a ball through Lieutenant White's shoulder will be on the ground to-night!" he exclaimed. "If he is, I will take good care to put him where the dogs will not be able to bite him, the accursed Gringo!"

And then the Mexican retreated.

As soon as the Lone Hand judged that the fellow was a safe distance away, he rose and resumed his former position at the window.

When the outlaw reached the neighborhood of the old house he sat down upon a log a short distance from it, and directed his gaze toward the town.

It was evident that he waited for the approach of the lynchers with their victim.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LYNCHERS.

PROMPTLY at twelve o'clock the citizens of Pedroville, who possessed a knowledge of the "surprise" party, began to gather in the old corral by the calaboose.

As Ben Jackman had anticipated, each man to whom he had imparted the secret had one or two particular friends, who he considered ought not to be shut out from a share in the fun, and so, in strict confidence, the secret was given away, and these men had chums to whom they confided the thing.

The result of this was that a little after twelve there was a good thirty men in the corral, in place of the ten or fifteen whom the marshal had expected.

All of them wore black masks, but as they had made no other effort to disguise themselves, and being attired in the same clothes that they usually wore, it was an easy matter for nearly every man in the crowd to identify the other.

It was about half-past twelve before the mayor arrived, and the marshal waited for him before commencing proceedings.

His Honor had been in the Big Texas Sand-bank Saloon, having a little game with the proprietor and Colonel John Bellingham to pass the time away, and growing interested in the game the time had passed more rapidly than any of them had been aware of, and that was what made the party late; with the mayor had come Doc Mortimer and Colonel John, who had postponed his return home when he heard there was going to be a hanging-match.

"Well, are we ready?" the mayor asked, as he encountered the marshal at the gate of the corral, where the latter had been on the watch for him.

"Oh, yes, and waiting for you: there's a big gang hyer; twice as many men as we want," the marshal remarked, in a discontented way.

"Well, well, you know you cannot blame the boys for wanting to take in the fun, that is only natural. I reckon you and I would do the same," the mayor replied.

"Yes, I s'pose so, but I didn't reckon on the bull town being in."

"What difference does it make? One thing is sure, if we are all mixed up in this business no one can make a row about it hereafter, for we will all be tarred with the same brush."

"That's so; I say, don't you think it would be as well for you to give the boys a little speech, jest to kind of outline the programme?" the marshal suggested.

"Yes, I reckon that would not be a bad idea," Jack Hamilton remarked. "What do you think, gentlemen?" he said, addressing the sport and colonel.

"A very good idea, I should think," the rancher replied. "Then the boys will know exactly what is expected of them."

"That is my opinion," Doc Mortimer remarked. "Even a picnic of this kind must be run according to regular rules or it will run itself into the ground."

"The work ought to be cut and dried, before-hand."

"That is so: well, I will give 'em a speech."

This was right in the mayor's line, for he was noted for being one of the best off-hand speakers in the county.

"Gentlemen, will you please come to order?" the mayor exclaimed. "I have a few words to say to you."

All conversation immediately ceased and every eye was fixed upon the mayor.

He was recognized, of course; the black mask which hid his face was no disguise; for he wore his usual costume, and even if he had been rigged out in a strange suit, his voice would surely have betrayed him.

As soon as all was quiet, and he saw he had secured the attention of the crowd, he began.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are met hyer to-night for an object which the law will not be apt to sanction, but thar are cases, fellow-citizens, when men must rise superior to the law!"

There was a little murmur of applause at this point.

"I am going ahead in defining our position, my friends, with a good deal of confidence, because my face is covered with a mask, and I am aware that thar isn't any of you who know who I am, any more than I know who any of you are."

A quiet laugh came from the crowd at this announcement.

"To-morrow if anybody should feel called upon to inquire into this hyer piece of business which we are going to transact to-night, and should ask me who was present, I should say, why, how do I know? They wasn't a man thar, they say, that didn't have his face covered with a mask, and even if I happened, by accident, to be passing along the street and saw the gang, I couldn't tell who they were, but I reckon they were all strangers to Pedroville."

Again there was a murmur of applause.

"Now then, fellow-citizens, what is the work in hand? We have got in the calaboose a red-handed, black-bearded outlaw. Thar isn't a doubt in my mind that the fellow has been guilty of a hundred crimes, but if we go according to law all we can do is to hand him over to the sheriff, then he will go to the county seat to be tried, and the chances are that he will break jail and escape before he has been there a week."

"That's so, that's so—true as preaching!" the crowd murmured.

"Now we propose to step in a leetle ahead of the sheriff, and the law, and give this fellow a taste of the quality of that judge from whose decisions thar is no appeal."

"I refer to my respected friend, Judge Lynch."

There was a "snicker" from the crowd at this point.

"The judge is just the man to deal with an outlaw of this kind," the mayor continued. "As far as can be discovered, thar isn't much doubt that this half-breed, Comanche Joe, as he calls himself, is a member of the outlaw band known as the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande—one of the worst gangs of scoundrels that have ever been known in this region."

"We want to find out something about this gang, so we can raise a force and wade in to clean them out."

"We propose to make this half-breed spit out what he knows, and in order to persuade him to confess, we intend to put a rope round his neck, run him up to a tree and let him hang thar until he is willing to make a clean breast of it."

"Yes, yes, that is the ticket!" cried one of the masked men and the rest took up the cry.

"Now, we have got to get him out of the calaboose and the jailer may be inclined to be ugly—"

"Commander-in-chief, allow me to engineer that part of the business," Doc Mortimer exclaimed at this point.

"I have got a very persuasive way with me, and I should not be at all surprised if I succeeded in inducing brother Slab Kellogg to deliver the prisoner."

"My name is Bob, the Charmer, and I am a hustler from Hustlerville."

There were few in the crowd who did not recognize the genial proprietor of the great Texan Sandbank saloon, and a general laugh went the round of the crowd at the odd name he had affixed to himself.

"Well, Mr. Bob, I reckon you are just the man we want, so you can attend to that part of the programme, if you want to."

"I will do it, great chief—do it right up to the handle and don't you forget it!" the sport replied.

"We'll advance on the calaboose then at once, for time is flying and life is short," the mayor remarked.

"I want about three men who have got good, big shooting-irons," the sport declared.

A dozen volunteered immediately, fetching out their weapons to show they answered the description.

The sport selected the three nearest to him.

"Now, gentlemen, the game is for me to get

Slab to open the door, and the moment he does it, you must rush in and cover him with your weapons."

"Give him to understand that it is a first-class hold-up, and, if he is ugly, will be plugged."

"Oh, I reckon that Slab will not make any trouble when he finds how things are," the marshal remarked.

"If he is wise he will not, for we mean business!" the mayor declared.

"Go ahead, Mr. Bob!"

The lynchers started for the calaboose, Doc Mortimer and his chosen three, one of whom was the colonel, in the advance.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SURPRISING THE JAILER.

BEHIND the sport and his three assistants came the mayor and the marshal and then the rest of the crowd marched along behind.

Although no order had been given to observe silence, there was not a man in the crowd who did not understand what was required and the procession moved along on quietly, and with as much decorum, as a funeral party.

"By the way, Ben," observed the mayor as a sudden thought occurred to him, "I reckon we ain't running this picnic jest as it ought to be run."

"How is that? It seems to me that everything is going according to Hoyle."

"Why, before we left the corral we ought to have chosen some man to act as Judge Lynch."

"Oh, that is all right—you are Judge Lynch!"

"Yes, but to do the thing as it ought to be done I should be proposed and elected."

"It is all understood; in your speech you showed how the thing was to be run, and, as was only natural, the boys jumped to the conclusion that you would attend to the machine. You don't think, do you, that thar is a soul in the gang who don't know who you are?"

"Oh, I reckon the boys have got onto me!" the official replied with a laugh.

"You bet they have!" the marshal declared. "And as they know who you are, they expect that you will run the thing, of course."

"Yes, yes, I presume that is the way. They have elected me Judge Lynch without going through the formality of voting."

"That is the way of it."

"Well, it is all right, anyway. Of course it would be better for me to have the running of the thing."

By this time the sport, with his force, was at the corner of the calaboose; he halted and held up his hand, and the mayor, understanding that this was a request for a stop, halted also and immediately held up his hand as a signal to the men in the rear.

They came to a stand-still with the precision of trained soldiers.

Then the sport said to his assistants:

"Now, boys, I will rouse Slab up, and you keep on the further side of the door out of, sight until he opens the thing, then dash right past me and put your revolvers right under his nose, while I will do the chinning."

"That is understood now?"

The three said it was, and then Doc Mortimer advanced to the door and rapped loudly on it, while the three got out of the way as suggested.

The jailer was a sound sleeper and the sport had to knock three times before he succeeded in rousing him.

"Hello! who's thar?" the jailer finally asked, advancing to the door.

"It's me, Johnny Bird."

"Who in blazes is Johnny Bird?" Slab Kellogg growled.

"Wh', don't you know me? I'm from across the crick."

"Go 'long! I don't know you from a side of sole-leather!" the jailer retorted. "W'ot do you mean by coming hyer in the middle of the night h'isting me out of my bunk?"

"Go 'way! or I'll come outside thar and knock the daylight outen you."

"Say, I've got a bet on you," the pretended Johnny Bird declared.

"You will have a head on you if I come out thar and take a hold on you!" the disgusted jailer declared.

"Don't git mad with a feller you know! I've got a bottle of whisky for you hyer."

"The blazes you have!"

"Fact! and I've got a bet of five dollars that I want you to help me win."

"W'ot is it?"

The jailer was somewhat mollified now, and disposed to listen to the stranger.

"Are you six feet high?"

"No, I ain't."

"Well, I bet five dollars that you wasn't."

"You have got the galoot w'ot bet I was. I am jest five feet ten and a half inches, and you kin bet a thousand dollars onto it."

"Much obliged! I reckoned when I bet that I would collar the fiver. Hyer's your whisky."

The calaboose-keeper opened the door, totally unsuspecting that there was any trap, for no trick of this kind had ever been played on him since he had been jailer.

No sooner was the door opened than the three

men rushed forward and menaced the astonished Kellogg with the cocked revolvers.

"I brow up your hands, old man, or you will get the whole top of your head blown off!" the sport exclaimed.

The jailer had naturally fallen back when the trap was thus abruptly sprung upon him, and his rage was great.

"You darned p'isoned liar!" he cried, "you don't dar' to give me a show for my money!"

"I will give you a show to go straight to blazes, if you try to kick up any fuss!" Doc Mortimer answered, sternly.

"Go through him, boys, and take his weapons."

"Don't you dar' to!" Slab Kellogg protested.

"Ah, would you?" cried the colonel, showing the cold muzzle of his big seven-shooter right against the forehead of the enraged jailer.

"You jest go slow, or I will bore a hole through you big enough to take the pipe of a driven well."

"No use to bore him for water—you won't find any. Tap him for whisky and you might strike it rich," Doc Mortimer remarked.

The jailer was deprived of his weapons, despite his remonstrances, and then the sport gave the signal for the rest to advance.

"The trick is worked! Come on, boys!" he exclaimed.

The lynchers advanced.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE HANGING-MATCH.

WHEN the jailer beheld the lynchers advance, the fact dawned upon him that about all the male population of the town was engaged in the matter, and he came to the conclusion that there wasn't any use of being ugly. At the same time he felt exceeding sore over the fact that such a trick had been so easily played upon him, for he knew Pedroville well enough to understand that it would be a standing joke against him, and that he would not be apt to hear the last of it for some time.

He was disposed to pick a quarrel with some one, and so pitched upon the man who had fooled him, and who, in the darkness, he had not recognized.

"I ain't a-kicking against the town!" he declared, "but I have got it in for you, Johnny Bird, or w'otever you call yourself!"

"You will have to give me satisfaction for this hyer thing!"

"I am jest the man who can do it, Slab, my boy, and I don't care a picayune how you come at me—fists, knives or pistols, it is all one to me!"

And then, all of a sudden, Slab Kellogg recognized the speaker.

Johnny Bird was the sport, Doc Mortimer, one of the best "all-round" fighters in the county, and the jailer knew that he stood no chance at all in a contest with a man like the veteran sport; and then he made the discovery that the mayor and marshal were leading the lynchers, for, of course, the moment Kellogg saw the masked men advancing, he understood that they had hostile designs upon his prisoner, the half-breed.

If there had been any doubt in his mind in regard to this, it would have been dispelled when he saw the rope, with the hangman's noose in the end, carried by the marshal.

"Oh, it's all right," he said, sulkily. "I reckon I ought not to get my back up, but it is a mighty rough joke on me!"

The mayor and marshal halted on the steps of the jail, while the lynchers closed in around them.

Doc Mortimer and his assistants entered the cell of the prisoner, acting upon the mayor's instructions to bring the half-breed out.

Comanche Joe was awake and sitting on his bunk when the party entered.

Having been warned he understood what was coming and was prepared for it.

"There's a gentleman outside who wants to have a little talk with you, and as resistance will not do you any good you might as well go along quietly," Doc Mortimer remarked.

"All right, me go," the half-breed replied, perfectly calm, accepting the situation with true Indian indifference.

The half-breed was placed between the armed men and escorted to the street.

Being severely manacled with handcuffs there was no danger of his attempting to resist or escape, even if he had not been surrounded by so large a force.

"Whar's the nearest tree?" the mayor had asked the marshal, while the prisoner was being brought out.

"A couple of thousand yards down the street," the official replied.

So, acting on this information, the mayor led the way to the open country.

The Lone Hand's supposition in regard to the tree which would be selected by the lynchers was correct, for the party halted under the lightning-blasted tree.

Ben Jackman was an old cow-puncher, and with a skill that came from long practice he threw a coil of the rope over the projecting

limb of the tree, retaining the end in which the noose was formed in his hand.

A score of the masked men immediately laid hold of the rope after it had come to the ground; they did not wait for orders, for they understood the programme.

The half-breed beheld these ominous preparation without apparently being affected in the least by them, for not a muscle in his face moved, and he surveyed the placing of the rope across the limb of the tree with as much unconcern as though it had naught to do with him.

No one of the spectators was more indifferent.

"Now then, Comanche Joe, do you see this rope?" the mayor asked, after the preparations were complete.

"Comanche Joe is not blind," the half-breed retorted, displaying a courage that appealed to the admiration of the bystanders.

"You understand what it is for?"

"To hang some one, mebbe."

"Exactly, and you are the man."

"Joe thought so," and he gazed at the rope with a spirit of inquiry, as though debating with himself as to whether it would hurt or not.

By this time the moon had risen high in the heavens; it was almost as bright as by day, and the slightest change of expression could be detected.

"Now, Comanche, this is no fool business," the mayor explained.

"We mean to go right through with this thing; that thar rope is for you, and, inside of five minutes, you will be run up to that tree."

"Why not do it and no talk?" demanded the outlaw in an extremely insolent way.

This enraged the marshal and he shook his clinched fist fiercely in the face of the prisoner.

"You darned copper-colored galoot!" he cried. "You had better keep a civil tongue in your head, or else I will take a club and beat a little sense into you!"

A contemptuous smile was the only answer the half-breed made to the threat.

"Let us go slow," said the mayor. "Mebbe, this heathen has got the idee that we don't really mean business, and that we are only fooling with him."

"But it ain't so, Comanche Joe, as you will speedily find out. We are old business from the word, go, and we are in dead earnest, every time!"

"Yes, this is a real rope—no make believe about it!" the marshal exclaimed, shaking the noose in the face of the half-breed, who did not manifest the slightest sign of fear.

"You are a red-handed outlaw and, no doubt, in your time you have killed more good honest men than you have got fingers and toes," the mayor continued. "And though you may have escaped the law you have run across a judge now who will make it warm for you."

"Judge Lynch has got his grip on you and when he goes for a man he generally makes clean work of it."

"Comanche Joe have you anything to say before we string you up to this tree to serve as an awful warning to all outlaws that it is not healthy for them to be caught in the neighborhood of Pedroville?"

"What good for me to talk?" demanded the half-breed. "You will hang me anyway!"

"No, thar's a chance for you to get out of this scrape if you choose to avail yourself of it," the mayor said.

"I wouldn't give him no show!" the marshal cried. "Run him right up and give him a chance to see how well he kin dance upon nothing!"

The idea of this was to terrify the outlaw.

"What chance?" asked the half-breed, totally unmoved by the fierce words of the marshal.

"Give away your pards!" the mayor exclaimed.

"My pards?" asked the outlaw, as though he did not comprehend what the other meant.

"Yes, you are a member of this outlaw gang who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

The half-breed shook his head.

"Do you deny it, you pisoned snake?" cried the marshal, enraged at the obstinacy of the man.

"Didn't I tell you before I know not?"

"You might as well sum the case up and see if you can't choke the truth out of him!" the marshal declared.

"I will give you one more opportunity," the mayor remarked. "Don't flatter yourself that we are not in earnest, for if you do, you will make the biggest mistake that you ever made in your life!"

"If you will tell us all you know about these outlaws we will give you a chance for your life; if you will give us information so we can attack and disperse the band, we will let you go free."

"Can't tell what don't know," the half-breed remarked, doggedly.

"Well, since you are obstinate I reckon we will have to try what effect the rope will have on you!" the mayor exclaimed.

"We will give you a taste of what hanging is and, after it, you may be willing to speak."

"Comanche Joe no 'fraid to die—he is no white-livered rat!" the half-breed exclaimed, proudly.

"Ready therewith the rope, boys!" the mayor cried, "and when I give the word run him up. Don't be too quick about it, for we don't want to h'ist the man into kingdom come right away."

"Now then—the last chance! Will you tell us what you know of these outlaws who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande?"

And as the mayor spoke the marshal advanced to place the noose around the neck of the half-breed, and the men who had hold of the rope prepared to run him up to the tree.

But this little "hanging match," as the crowd in their wantonness termed it, was not destined to come off, for just as the last words of the sentence escaped the mayor's lips, upon the air rose a chorus of wild yells, and from the cover of the shrubbery which surrounded a deserted house, a few hundred yards away, came a troop of horsemen—a whole regiment, as it seemed to the excited fancy of the lynchers.

The light of the moon was so bright that the citizens could plainly see the new-comers.

Each face was covered by a black mask, each left hand displayed a red glove.

The truth at once flashed upon the crowd.

It was the outlaws in force. The Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande had come to the rescue of their comrade.

The horsemen came charging on at the best speed of their animals, yelling at the top of their lungs, and as soon as they were clear of the bushes they opened fire with their revolvers.

The townsmen became panic-stricken at once, and although nearly all were armed, they made no attempt to use their weapons, but turned and fled in wild disorder.

All but the marshal, and he was stricken to the ground by the half-breed with his manacled hands, just as Jackman attempted to put the noose of the rope over his head.

Then, the moment he felled the marshal, Comanche Joe ran like a deer toward the horsemen, and when they saw him coming they slackened their pace, and finally came to a halt, yelling all the time, and blazing away with their pistols at the panic-stricken fugitives, who tore madly away for the town, thinking the brigands were close at their heels.

The outlaws had brought a spare horse for the half-breed, and soon he was in the saddle, mounting with wonderful quickness, despite the fact that he was hampered with the handcuffs.

"Aha, the dogs! see how they run," cried the captain of the raiders. "They haven't the courage to turn and fight."

"Wheel about and vamose!"

The outlaws began their retreat.

CHAPTER XXX.

A LIVELY SKIRMISH.

"OH, the dogs!" the leader of the outlaws again cried. "Wouldn't I like to make a few of them bite the dust!"

The horsemen had wheeled about by this time, and were retreating up the road which ran parallel with the Rio Grande.

The movement was performed with the skill of well-trained soldiers, and it was evident that the discipline of the men was excellent.

The outlaws were riding in regular cavalry fashion, too, by fours, with the captain and the half-breed at the head of the squadron, and their animals were trotting along at a moderate pace, as though the riders were not in the least hurry.

In fact, as far as the citizens of Pedroville were concerned, there was not the least occasion for them to make haste.

The Pedrovillians had no idea of making a stand, but were hurrying to the shelter of the town at a rate of speed which would have excited the admiration of the average foot-racer.

"You had a narrow escape, Comanche!" said the chief.

"Yes, but a miss is as good as a mile, you know," the half-breed replied.

"I could have advanced before, but I waited to allow them to bring you right to the rope, so their disappointment would be the greater," the outlaw chief remarked.

"The man who was trying to force you to a confession, said he was going to hang you as a warning that Pedroville and its neighborhood was dangerous for men of our stamp. By this time, though, I reckon they have got the idea into their heads that it is far more dangerous for the men of Pedroville to attempt to interfere with the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

Hardly had the boast escaped from the lips of the outlaw leader, when a couple of revolver-shots rung out clear and shrill on the still night air.

The steed of the outlaw chief gave a convulsive bound, and then sunk down upon its knees, made a desperate effort to rise, and then rolled over on its side, dead.

The bullet had been carefully aimed to hit a vital part, striking the animal behind the shoulder so as to pierce the heart.

So sudden was the fall of the animal that if the rider had not been a wonderfully good horseman, he surely would have got an ugly fall.

As it was, his skill saved him from being

either unseated when the animal bounded forward, or from pitching over his head when the horse went down on his knees.

With extraordinary adroitness he disengaged his feet from the stirrups and threw himself off sideways as the horse rolled over, landing on his feet.

One of the outlaws in the ranks, whose horse had also been shot, was not so fortunate.

This shot was not as well aimed as the other, and did not at once give the steed a mortal wound.

The beast plunged and reared, breaking the lines of the troop, and finally fell over on its side, throwing its rider and bruising him badly.

Hardly had the two men been unseated, when there came two more shots; two more horses plunged madly about, badly wounded.

This time the outlaws detected the quarter from whence the shots came.

They saw the bright flash of the flames from the window of the old hunter's cabin as the death-dealing balls sped on their way.

The brigands had not returned their pistols to their holsters, but still carried them in their hands, and so they at once, without waiting for orders, fired a regular volley at their unknown, ambushed assailants.

Hardly had the report died away on the air, when crack, crack! again the revolvers of the concealed men spoke, and this time the marksmen did not aim at the horses but at the men.

As the distance was so trifling, both bullets went straight to the mark, and two of the outlaw riders tumbled out of their saddles.

It would be a sorry pistol-shot indeed who could miss his man at such short range.

Their quick return of the fire showed the outlaws that their volley had not harmed their unknown assailants.

This was not strange, for the cabin was built of thick slabs, bullet-proof beyond a doubt.

All that the men in ambush had to do was to fire through the open window at the outlaws, all huddled together, not fifty feet away, and then dodged down, safe from danger, protected as they were by the thick wall of the cabin.

The outlaws had been in too many skirmishes not to understand this, and when the answering shots showed that their bullets had not damaged their foes, they put spurs to their horses and were soon out of revolver range.

The discontented leader caught one of the riderless horses as he came prancing by him, after its master had been tumbled from the saddle by the well-aimed bullet, and vaulted into the saddle; when the band were out of range of the concealed foes' fire he called a halt.

The outlaws were furious and the chief fairly beside himself with rage.

Indeed it was enough to raise the anger of a man much less given to displays of temper than this hot-headed, arrogant outlaw chief.

It was mortifying in the extreme to think that after having, with a dash and a burrab, put the armed citizens of Pedroville to flight, without their daring to even attempt to resist the attack, that a pair of concealed foes—from the two shots coming together it was plain that there were only two men concealed in the hunter's cabin—should be able to do so much damage as to force them to fly in confusion from the field, leaving behind them a dead and a badly wounded man, and two horses in a similar condition.

"By the eternal hills! I will have them out of that and give their carcasses to the wolves!" yelled the outlaw chief in the very white heat of rage.

"And there's only two men, capt'n, I reckon," said one of the outlaws who carried his arm in a sling.

The speaker was an old acquaintance of the reader, for it was no other than the outlaw who was termed "White," the second in command—the brains of the band, and the man who had been shot by the Lone Hand when he and Webster came to the rescue of Aldama and Moreno on the Buckner trail.

As the Lone Hand had suspected at that time the man was not nearly so badly hurt as he pretended.

The man-hunter had not fired to kill, or even to badly wound. All he wished was to disable the man so as to capture him.

"Yes, only two men, but they must be very devils or else they would never have dared to make this attack on us, but we will make them pay dearly for their rashness before we are through with them, the accursed scoundrels!" cried the outlaw chief.

The other shook his head.

"I tell you what it is, capt'n, you ain't a-going to have no easy job to dislodge them men from that old cabin."

"The walls are bullet-proof and have only a window and door—only two ways to git into it, and one well-armed, desperate man at each entrance, I calculate, would hold the cabin ag'in' a pesky big crowd."

"Yes, that is true," the outlaw chief admitted, struck by the force of the reasoning.

"I knew that there would be no chance of gaining an entrance by way of the window," he continued, "and I had no idea of attempting it. But I was going to begin an attack in that direction; have the men, you know, get just out

of range, keep up a brisk fire and act as if they intended to charge every moment.

"Then, as their attention would be occupied by this threatened attack, I intended with the rest of the force to batter in the door and overpower the defenders in a sudden rush."

Again the other shook his head.

"I am afraid it won't do, capt'n. The plan seems all right, but when you come to try it on, I don't take no stock in its working."

"Why not?" demanded the other, impatiently.

"What is the trouble?"

"In the first place, you ain't going to fool no sich two men as are inside of that house with no sham attack," the hatchet-faced man observed, shrewdly.

"You kin see from the way they have sailed into this fight that they are old slayers and up to snuff."

"No two men who wasn't as brave as tigers and as cool as cucumbers, would have dared to attack us the way they did."

"They will know the moment you commence the window business, that you don't mean to attack that p'int, 'cos they understand the game well enough to know that an army couldn't force their way through that space as long as the men inside had plenty of cartridges."

"They will suspicion, right to onc't, that you mean to go for 'em by way of the door, and supposing that you can succeed in breaking it in, how many men will you lose before you git into the cabin?"

"Darn it all! it will cost ten or a dozen men, and although our cusses are brave enough, yet I reckon that when the first three or four go down the rest will be a little skeery."

"I believe you are right!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, "but what is to be done?"

"Another p'int! these hyer citizens may rally when they find that you ain't ont'er 'em, and thar's enough of them to make a good fight, if they only get some sand into their craws."

"By heaven! I would give ten years of my life to be able to get at these men!" the brigand leader cried, shaking his clinched fist at the cabin.

"I know who the two are, too. It is this accursed stranger—this Hand, and young Webster. I looked for both of them to-night when the lynchers were assembling in the corral, and could not discover either one. My idea was to single Hand out and send a bullet into him, when the attack was made, but as I couldn't find him, I concluded he was not coming."

"The cuss smoked our game, evidently, and laid in wait hyer to let drive at us as we retreated."

"And is he going to punish us in this way and we not be able to get at him?" the outlaw chief demanded, indignantly.

"Oh, thar's more than one way to kill a cat. I reckon we kin set fire to the cabin and burn the cusses out!" the lanky man observed with a chuckle.

"The very thing!" cried the outlaw chief, delighted at the idea.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TRYING IT ON.

"Yes, yes; I was an idiot not to think of that idea," the outlaw leader added.

"I calculate that will work."

And the brigand lieutenant indulged in another ferocious chuckle.

"But how can the thing be accomplished?"

"Do you see the leetle shed at the upper end of the house?"

"Yes."

"It is filled with all sorts of rubbish that the old man has collected, for the hunter uses it as a work-shop on rainy days. I was in thar onc't with him, when I was dickering for a skin to make me a cap."

"One of our boys must creep in and set fire to the rubbish."

"Greaser John is the man! He can do the trick equal to any red-skin that ever walked."

"Yes; I reckon the sly imp can do it if any man kin. The cabin is an old one—we have not had any rain now for nearly three months, and the slabs must be as dry as tinder."

"Undoubtedly."

"And when the thing is once started, I reckon it will burn like a bonfire."

"Oh, yes; if it once gets under way in the shed, there will be no saving the house."

"I reckon the cusses inside won't try to do anything to stop it, for they will have to come outside to work that game, and then we will be able to fill 'em full of holes."

"Yes, yes; I understand. We must have our men posted so as to command both the door and window, and thus cut off all chance of escape."

"That is the programme! And then we must not forget to take these townsmen of Pedrovilla into consideration."

"They are a flock of sheep and will not be apt to make trouble!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, contemptuously. "We have given them a scare to-night that they will not be likely to get over for a month."

"Hold on; we don't want to be too sure of that," the other counseled.

"I know the galoots took to their heels and

ran as if the devil was after them," he continued. "But then, you must remember that we took them by surprise, and the way we charged was enough to stampede old and experienced fighting men."

"Thar is good men in Pedrovilla—plenty of fellows who, if they have any show for their money, will stand up to the rack and fight to the death. There were lots of them in this crowd, but the trouble was they were stampeded by the rest who were not fighters. When they reach the town, though, and come to think the matter over, they will feel mortally ashamed of themselves, and the odds are big that they will get the notion of giving us a fight in order to wipe out the disgrace of their retreat."

"Yes, I believe you are right," the outlaw chief remarked, after thinking over the matter for a moment.

"I see what you are driving at: If the townsmen get an idea that we are having a fight here, they will undoubtedly muster a force and advance to attack us."

"That is my idee. All they want is time to think the matter over—time to recover from the stampede, and to reflect how they ran like a pack of cowards without attempting to fight—without even firing a single shot, and this will make them so ashamed and mad that the chances are ten to one that they will go for us as savage as tigers, if they get a good opportunity."

"You are correct, I think; and before we attempt to attack the cabin, we must post a force down the road, so as to fight the citizens if they attempt to come out from the town to attack us."

"That is the programme, and we want to send 'bout all our men, too, that we kin possibly spare, so that they kin wax blades out of the townsmen, if they dare to come out against us."

"We can!" the outlaw leader exclaimed decidedly. "We will not need more than eight men here, four to watch the door and the same number at the window," the lieutenant suggested. "Put them in ambush too, so that when the cabin is fired and our birds see that they have got to get out, it will look as if the coast is clear."

"Oh, no!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, "you will not fool our men in that way! They will know well enough that we have not fired the house and then been obliging enough to get out of the way and leave the road open for them to escape. No, no, they are not such fools as that!"

"Wa-al, I reckon I am a leetle out thar," the lieutenant admitted. "But anyway, they will not know where our men are placed, and the odds are big that our boys will be able to riddle them as they run."

"We will set about it at once!"

During this conversation the two had been a little apart from the gang, so that the conversation was not overheard by the rest of the band, who were waiting impatiently, chafing at the delay, to avenge the loss which they had suffered.

"I suppose I had better take charge of the detachment which is to guard the road, while you attend to the burning out of these rats," the brigand leader remarked.

"Yes, I calculate that will be the best way," the other replied, "and then we will each have a job that suits."

"Them galoots have got their eyes on us, of course, and are watching our movements, so the first thing for us to do is to get back to whar we were, ahind the old house, so our movements will be masked, and the cusses will not be able to see what we are up to when we divide our force."

This was wise counsel, and the movement was at once made, and soon the outlaws were again concealed from the sight of the pair in the hunter's cabin who were watching them earnestly.

"We have beaten them off!" Webster exclaimed, astonished at the easy triumph.

"Well, well, I had no idea we would have so little trouble."

The Lone Hand smiled at the enthusiasm of the Bostonian.

"Oh, no, we have not yet seen the last of them."

"But they have retreated."

"Yes, but it is like the tiger who recoils to make his spring more certain."

"You think then that they have not given up the attack?"

"Do you think it likely that a large body of desperate outlaws, like these fellows, flushed with an easy victory over the Pedrovilla men, and after we had laid out two of their troopers and forced them to retreat out of range, will be content to rest quiet, smarting under such a defeat?"

"No, it does not look probable, but they are out of sight."

"Yes, but did you not notice the direction in which they retreated?"

"Into the bushes which line the road."

"Exactly, not up the road itself."

"No, they certainly did not go by the road."

"They have only maneuvered to get out of

our vision so we will not be able to see what they are up to. There is some game on foot."

"Yes, I guess you are right," Webster observed, after thinking over the matter for a moment. "It is not possible that they would tamely retreat (without attempting to seek revenge for the defeat we have given them.)"

"And did you notice that after they halted two of them, stood apart from the rest, and held a consultation?"

"Yes, and one of them was the leader whom you so cleverly dismounted."

"And the other, with his arm in a sling, was the man whom I put a bullet into on the trail. The chief and his principal man evidently, and they were debating how to get us out of our fortress here without losing too many men in the attempt."

"And this retreat into the bushes signifies, I suppose, that they have agreed upon some plan?"

"Yes; they know that by a direct assault they would suffer severely, and might not succeed in storming our position, and so they must use strategy."

"I presume they will attempt to force an entrance through the door."

"That is the only point open to an assault, but if they try it the attempt will most certainly cost them dearly."

"Their game will be to batter the door in by some means, and then make a rush, and against that I must provide."

"I will leave you here to keep careful watch, while I erect a barricade, so, when the door is down, their passage into the house will be obstructed."

"Keep your eyes open and warn me if you see any movement that looks suspicious."

"All right!"

Then the Lone Hand proceeded to pile up all the movable articles in the place against the door.

The cabin could not boast of much furniture for there was only an old table, a couple of chairs, the bunk in the corner, a rude cupboard and some old boxes.

When these things were piled up against the door, however, a tolerably effective barricade was formed.

"There, I rather think that will bother the Red Glove Raiders when they come to attempt to rush in," the Lone Hand remarked after the work was completed.

"Hist! the outlaws are on the move!" the Bostonian warned.

The Lone Hand hastened again to his post of observation at the window.

Webster was correct.

The dark forms of three or four men could be distinguished moving amid the shrubbery that surrounded the old, deserted house, and then, in a body, the horsemen rode out from behind the curtain of bushes which had afforded them concealment, and proceeded at a walk down the road toward Pedrovilla.

This was the same movement they had performed when they charged to the rescue of the half-breed.

The outlaws in making this maneuver had been careful to keep out of range of the pair in the hunter's cabin.

"Well, what does this mean?" Webster exclaimed in astonishment.

"Is it possible that they have made up their mind to clean out Pedrovilla?"

"They will have a lively time if they attempt it," the Lone Hand remarked.

"The citizens have had ample opportunity now to recover from their panic, and as they, naturally, will be hungry for revenge, there is no doubt they will make a good fight."

"Oh, yes, if that is their game, it is a fool-hardy attempt. The town can surely muster fifty good fighting men, and they will have the advantage of the cover of the houses."

"And there is only sixteen or eighteen of these fellows," said the Lone Hand, whose quick eyes had noted the number of the outlaws as they rode along in the moonlight.

"Aha! all of them are not there!" he cried, the discovery immediately arousing his suspicions.

"Is it so?"

"Yes, see for yourself! Eight or ten men are missing, and among them is the fellow with his arm in the sling. I guess the plan now! These horsemen are to keep the Pedrovilla men from coming to our assistance, while the others attack us here, and as there is so few men detailed for the attempt, it seems they intend some trick rather than an open attack!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

PEDROVILLE WAKES UP.

As the reader will remember, when the outlaws charged upon the lynchers so unexpectedly, Ben Jackman, the marshal, was felled to the ground by the half-breed, who had been on the lookout for a chance to perform just such an operation.

He had struck the marshal full in the face with his manacled fists, and as Comanche Joe was a powerful fellow, the force of the shock had prostrated him; then, in the rush of the crowd to escape from the outlaws, a half a dozen

men had trampled over his body, half stunning him.

And it was not until the outlaws were in full retreat, that the doughty marshal recovered his senses sufficiently to sit up and look around him.

"Durn my skin!" he muttered. "I feel jest as if a lot of elephants had walked over me!"

And then, as he gazed upon the retreating horsemen, feeling so bruised and sore that he had doubts whether he would be able to get up and walk, he saw the tiny puffs of flame come from the windows of the old cabin, and witnessed their effect upon the Red Glove Raiders.

The spirits of the marshal rose at once, as he beheld the destructive effects of the fire.

"Durn me if old Nathan Smith ain't jest a-socking it to 'em!" he cried, for not understanding how the case stood, he imagined that it was the old hunter who had opened fire on the outlaws.

In his excitement he forgot his bruises and scrambled to his feet.

To tell the truth, he was not half so badly hurt as he had imagined.

Then the outlaws blazed away at the cabin, and the fire was returned, knocking two men out of the saddle.

Jackman was delighted at the sight, and he would have yelled aloud in his glee, had he not been fearful of attracting the attention of the outlaws, for they were not far off.

But, when the outlaws put spurs to their horses, and galloped out of range of the fire, the marshal's joy was unbounded.

"Durn it all to thunder!" he cried, "if the old man hain't whipped the gang, single-handed! I have made low remarks about that old cuss, too, and allowed that he was a mutton-headed jackass, but I take it all back now!"

"He's worth any ten men that thar is to-day in Pedroville!"

Then he saw the outlaws come to a halt and put their heads together in consultation.

"Hello! there's trouble ahead!" he exclaimed.

"They are going for to clean old Smith out, I reckon, and the old man will have a pesky uphill fight ag'in' all that crowd!"

"I'll skin out for assistance; thar ought to be men enough in the town to beat these fellers off!"

And the marshal, forgetting his bruises in the excitement of the moment, started off at the top of his speed for Pedroville.

As this affair happened on the outskirts of the village, five minutes' brisk running brought the marshal into the center of the town.

Despite the fact that the clocks showed that it was after one, Pedroville was a very wide-awake town just now.

About all the inhabitants were in the street, men, women and children.

Now that they were in the town, the men had recovered from their panic and felt decidedly ashamed of themselves for yielding so readily to the impulse of fear.

But, as Doc Mortimer honestly said, when asked by one of the citizens how it was that the lynchers all ran without attempting to make a fight—the aforesaid citizen insinuating that if he had been on the ground, he reckoned he would have taken a "few pops" at the outlaws, anyway:

"Maybe you would, maybe so, and maybe you wouldn't. It is easy enough for any man that wasn't there to tell what ought to have been done, but if you had been on the spot I reckon you would have led the whole gang into Pedroville."

The citizen put on a warlike aspect at this; remarked that no man had any right to doubt his courage, to which the sport responded that he reckoned there wasn't many people in the county who knew him, who had doubts about his pluck.

"But this thing was one of those cases which may never occur one time in a man's lifetime. We were taken so by surprise that we were demoralized, and were running like a lot of rabbits, before we really knew what we were doing."

"I smelt gunpowder during the war, gentlemen, for I was in it from the first to the last, and I can recall two or three just such panics as this one to-night, where veteran troops—men who had been under fire a hundred times and whose courage could not be questioned, broke and took to their heels like a lot of sheep."

"I am not trying to excuse myself, gentlemen, nor any man that was concerned in the business," the Doc said in conclusion. "There were enough of us to have given the outlaws a good, stiff fight, but they got the bulge on us in such a way that we were stampeded like a lot of mules!"

It was the general fear that, flushed with their success, the outlaws might attempt to take the town, and the citizens hastily prepared for the attack.

Men hurried here and there for arms; the women and children were placed in the cellars and all preparations made to give the brigands a warm reception if they dared to attack the village.

A dozen men or so were armed with guns, in

addition to their revolvers, five had repeating-rifles, the mayor and Doc Mortimer, in particular, possessing most excellent weapons, and, under the leadership of Jack Hamilton and the sport, the men of the town were formed in battle array.

"Gentlemen, with these rifles and shot-guns, we can whip these fellows out of their boots!" the sport exclaimed, as he looked upon the cohort.

"They haven't got any fire-arms but revolvers, and as our guns will serve at double the range of their weapons, we can pepper them like blazes long before they will be able to do any damage to us."

There was no disputing this fact, and the citizens, now full of courage, veering, as will be observed, from the one extreme to the other, clamored to be led against the outlaws.

"Mayor Hamilton, for the love of Heaven, give us a chance at them!" Colonel John Bellingham exclaimed.

"We are covered all over with disgrace, up to our necks in it, and if the story gets out we will be the laughing-stock of the State!"

"All we want is a chance to redeem ourselves! All we ask is to be led against the Red Glove Raiders, and if we don't welt blazes out of them I will never take another horn of whisky in my life, and that is a pretty tough vow for a good old Texan like myself to make!"

"It would be a fine idea to send out some scouts so as to see what the scoundrels are up to," Doc Mortimer suggested.

"Let the men with rifles and guns go so that they will be able to worry these rascals at long range."

Every man in the "outfit" at once volunteered, but the mayor, thinking the sport's idea a good one, decided that only those possessing a gun or a rifle should go.

There was considerable grumbling at this, but the mayor was firm and declared it must be as he said, and he volunteered to lend the colonel his rifle.

Just at this point, as the men chosen for the service stepped forward, Jackman, the marshal, made his appearance, breathless from running.

He was immediately surrounded by the excited citizens.

As soon as he could recover his breath he told his story, and great was the wonder it excited, for the men of Pedroville could hardly bring themselves to believe that old man Smith could turn out to be such a hero.

He was known to be an excellent shot, and as a hunter had no superior along the Rio Grande, but during his residence in the town he had never been known to engage in a fight of any kind, and his reputation for courage was not high.

"Old man Smith is a shining example to us, fellow-citizens!" the mayor declared.

"You bet!" Doc Mortimer exclaimed, "and I feel real grieved that I went for the old man the last time he came in my place, and skinned him out of ten dollars at poker. But, good heavens! who would have believed that he was composed of the stuff of which heroes are made?"

"You want to waltz out right lively!" the marshal urged, "for they were laying their heads together as I came away, and it is dollars to cents that they will try to clean the old man out, and one ag'in' twenty odd is mighty tough odds for a man to buck against."

"You bet!" cried the mayor.

"You can go your last dollar on that and call the turn every time!" Doc Mortimer declared.

"Don't let's talk any more!" the colonel implored. "Let's git! If I don't git a crack at these scoundrels pretty soon, I shall feel like having a fuss with some one in our own party!"

"Advance, then, gentlemen!" cried Jack Hamilton, "and show these blackguards that there is some fight in the men of this hyer town, although we did run like a pack of curs."

"We'll wipe that out!" exclaimed the sport, and a dozen voices took up the cry.

Away the five went, all hot and eager for the fight.

In five minutes' time they came in sight of the Red Glove Raiders posted on the road.

The citizens came to a halt.

"What's the programme?" asked the sport.

"To attack at once, of course, but I am doubtful in my mind whether we better go at 'em in a body, or skirmish round a bit."

As Mortimer had said, he was an old soldier, and his military knowledge came in play at this point.

"Let the men picked out for scouts advance as skirmishers, while the main body march slowly along the road two deep."

"As soon as the skirmishers think they are within range, let them open fire; this will annoy the enemy, for he will not be able to reply, and he will either have to charge or fall back."

"If he retreats, let the skirmishers follow him up, taking advantage of whatever cover they can get."

"If a charge is made, the skirmishers will fall back, contesting every foot of ground, while the main body comes forward to receive the attack."

"Good! we will whip them out of their boots!" the mayor declared.

"Mortimer, you take charge of the skirmish line and I will command the main body!"

"Go ahead, boys, and may the best man win!"

Away went Mortimer with his skirmishers at a brisk pace.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BATTLE.

CAPTAIN VERMILION, as the outlaw leader was called, had little expectation that the Pedrovillians would dare to come out and give him battle.

And he said, in a tone full of contempt, to his men as they rode into position:

"We have scared these dogs so thoroughly that there is not much chance of their plucking up courage enough to face us."

"If we were to ride into the town, possibly from behind the protection of their walls, they might show fight."

"And, thinking we have gone, they may come out, eager to fight us, you know, if they think there isn't any danger of our being here to fight!"

And at this jest the outlaws laughed loud and long.

They fully agreed with their leader, and held the men of the town in supreme contempt.

It was the first time they had ever encountered any of the men from Pedroville, and the headlong manner in which the lynchers had fled, impressed them with the belief that they were a set of sorry cowards.

These outlaws had short memories, or they might have recollected that in the past, on several occasions, when engaged in encounters with the Mexican troops and the Texan Rangers—the rangers in particular—they had found it convenient to make off at the best speed they could muster, acting on the motto,

"He who fights and runs away
May live to fight another day."

And that for a man to yield to sudden fears and retreat is no sure sign that on another occasion he may not fight as bravely as a lion.

After getting into position, the outlaw captain kept an earnest watch on the old cabin.

From where he sat in the middle of the road he commanded a good view of the house and its surroundings.

He saw his men creeping to their ambushes, selecting such positions that it was not possible for the inmates of the cabin to leave it either by the door or window without being exposed to a deadly fire.

"Aha!" chuckled Captain Vermilion in fierce glee, "wait until smoke and flames get in their deadly work! Soon the time will come when you will be forced out of your hole, and then comes my chance!"

"I am not safe while this accursed stranger lives! I can feel it in my bones! It is either his life or mine, and now that I have him in my power, safe in a trap, I should be a fool indeed to allow him to escape."

During these muttered reflections the outlaw chief had walked his horse to the rear of his command, and halted some ten paces away from his party, so as to command a better view of the hunter's cabin.

Never in this world did mortal man thirst more for the blood of a foe than did this outlaw leader hunger for the life of the Lone Hand.

The shed was on the opposite side of the house from where he was, so he was not able to watch the movements of the crafty Mexican upon whom had devolved the task of setting fire to the house.

"He will do the trick though, no fear of that," Captain Vermilion muttered, as he reflected on the matter. "There is not a better fellow in the world, I verily believe, than my hold 'Yellow,' Greaser John, for such a job as this."

"He is like a snake in his movements, as sly as a weasel and as cunning as a fox."

"Oh, there is no doubt but he will be able to burn these rats out of their hole."

And while he was muttering to himself his eyes were anxiously fixed on the roof of the hunter's cabin.

The moonlight being so strong that every object was almost as visible as by day, the outlaw chief knew that as soon as the smoke from the fire in the shed commenced to curl over the roof of the house he would be able to see it, and as that would be the first indication that the carefully-planned scheme had succeeded, the brigand leader kept an earnest watch.

Time seemed to move on leaden-gaited feet.

"What is the matter with him?" Captain Vermilion exclaimed, impatiently.

"Can it be that he cannot succeed in making a blaze?"

"Bah! it ought to be easy enough! If Greaser John fails in this attempt it will be the first failure of the kind that I have ever known him to make!"

But the outlaw chief was too impatient—too anxious for the result to allow sufficient time for the accomplishment thereof.

For with "honest Iago" the Mexican might have said:

"We work by wit and not by witchcraft and wit depends upon dilatory time."

Greaser John had not failed.

For hardly had the last word of the complaining sentence passed the lips of Captain Vermilion when his eyes caught sight of smoke ascending above the roof on the further side of the house.

"Ha, ha! at last!" he cried in fierce joy. "I felt sure that Greaser John would do the trick and he has not disappointed me!"

"Now, accursed spy! there are not many minutes of life left to you! Soon you will find your fort, which protected you so well from our bullets, has become too hot to hold you! Forced will you be to rush forth and then meet death; your fate a warning to all spies that the man who attempts to measure wits with Captain Vermilion, the chief of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande, takes his life in his hand!"

The smoke grew stronger and stronger and the face of the outlaw chief was convulsed with fierce glee as he looked upon the sight.

So deep was his interest in watching the progress of the fire that he paid no attention to what was going on in the direction of the town until an outcry from one of the Red Glove Raiders attracted his attention.

"Captain, hyer's a regular army advancing from Pedroville!"

Hastily turning in the saddle the outlaw chief looked toward the town.

The exclamation was truth itself.

There was a large body of men marching in regular soldier-like fashion from Pedroville, and that they were well armed too was evident, for the keen eyes of Captain Vermilion could see the glitter of the moonbeams upon the gun-barrels.

"Aha! I don't like that!" he ejaculated between his teeth.

"There is a chance that there are some rifles there, and if the dogs know how to use them, and have courage enough to do so, they will be able to worry us."

He did not make this speech within hearing of his men, for it was his policy to lead them to believe they were invincible, no matter how great the odds.

He rode toward his men and took a position on the right of the line.

"These fellows are coming out, boys, to give us a chance to start them on another foot-race; only this time we will be apt to hurt some of them so badly that they will not take as great an interest in the race as they did on the other occasion."

Some of the more reckless of the outlaws laughed at this sally, but quite a number of them—old, scarred desperadoes, veterans in crime, shook their heads, and one of them took it upon himself to speak.

"Captain, if these galoots have got the pluck to do any fighting they may worry us this time, for quite a number of them are armed with guns."

"Oh, I reckon the guns will not be of much use to them when we come to make a charge," the outlaw chief replied, carelessly.

"It gives them a big advantage though if they mean business," another one observed.

"Yes, boys, but I reckon that is exactly what they don't mean."

"They are coming on bravely enough now, because they know they are not within range and exposed to any danger, but once let the bullets commence to fly and I reckon you will see them falter; and as for the fellows with guns, when the fight comes they will be apt to throw them away for fear they cannot run as fast with them."

Again some of the younger and more reckless desperadoes laughed, but the veterans shook their heads, for the steady advance of the Pedroville men inspired them with alarm.

"Blast my blooming eyes!" cried a big fellow in a pea-jacket, whose accent betrayed that he was an Englishman, "thar's about fifty of 'em—mebbe sixty! It is big odds if they have got the sand to fight."

"And that is exactly what they haven't got!" Captain Vermilion declared.

"Do you suppose a lot of curs who ran like sheep when we charged on them before will be apt to stand and fight now?"

"No, 'tain't likely, but then such blooming things do happen sometimes," the other replied.

"They have come to a halt!" cried one of the outlaws, the first to detect it.

"Didn't I tell you that they would not dare to attack us, guns or no guns?" the outlaw chief observed, contemptuously.

"Mebbe they are holding a confab to discuss wot is the best way to come at us," suggested another of the outlaws.

"More likely to discuss which is the best way to retreat in case we advance on them!" Captain Vermilion declared.

And then he took occasion to glance around at the old hunter's cabin.

The smoke had increased considerably, but it was plain that the shed had not begun to blaze anyway fiercely as yet.

"I will have time to beat these fellows off," the outlaw chief muttered.

Cries of alarm from his men now attracted his attention.

"They are coming—they are coming!" the outlaws cried.

Doc Mortimer and his skirmishers had begun their forward movement.

The outlaw chief scowled when he saw the dozen men spread out, and noticed that they were all armed with guns.

The Pedroville men did mean to fight after all, and they were going at it too in a business-like way.

"Ready, boys! We'll charge on these fellows and scatter them!" Captain Vermilion cried.

He waited until the skirmish line was within a thousand yards and then gave the command.

"Charge!"

On went the outlaws with wild cries, waving their revolvers in the air.

And the skirmishers halted, each selecting his favorite position for shooting.

The outlaws did not like the look of things, and by command of their leader spread out as far as possible.

When they got within five hundred yards Doc Mortimer gave the word.

"Give it to 'em, boys!"

Terrific was the volley.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED RESULT.

EACH one of the skirmishers had tried to pick his man, but only six of them fired—the men armed with rifles, and the result of the discharge was that four of the brigands were badly hurt, and two, who tried the old dodge of making their horses rear in time to receive the fire, were dismounted, their horses being disabled.

Six men, one-third nearly of the entire force were down, and therefore it was no wonder that the line was thrown into confusion.

The outlaws wavered.

Captain Vermilion was wild with rage.

"Onward, onward!" he cried. "They will run the moment we get near them!"

Thus inspired, with the courage of desperation, the outlaws put spurs to their horses, and with still fiercer yells than before, hurried toward the foe.

The main body of the Pedroville men, encouraged by the deadly result of the opening volley of their skirmishers, pressed forward, answering the yells of the outlaws with cries of defiance equally as loud.

"Steady, boys, steady," counseled the mayor, Jack Hamilton, who had also "smelt fire" during the rebellion.

"We have got them and will sweep the scoundrels off the face of the earth!"

"Double-quick, now! yah, yah!"

And yelling like a demon the mayor broke into a run.

His command followed the example, advancing rapidly, yet keeping their formation remarkably well, for undrilled men.

The Pedrovillians were determined to redeem their reputation, and most certainly no old veterans, heroes of a hundred well-fought fields, ever advanced to the support of a skirmish line with greater courage or in a more soldier-like manner.

Doc Mortimer waited until the outlaws were well within a hundred yards before he permitted his men to fire a second volley, for the moment the first was discharged he had cried out:

"Don't let a man fire another shot until he gets the word from me, and then give it to 'em all together!"

"Aim low, you men with shot-guns, and put the buckshot where it will do damage!"

"The revolvers of these scoundrels will not be effective until they get within about a hundred feet of us, and by that time I reckon thar will not be many of the galoots left."

"This is our fight, boys! We can whip these rascals single-handed; we don't need any backing!"

The outlaws were within a hundred yards, charging onward with a courage worthy of a better cause.

"Now, boys, steady—give it to 'em!" the old sport cried.

Again the blaze of fire came from the skirmish line; six double-barreled shot-guns—heavily loaded with buckshot, the second barrel discharged so soon after the first that the second sounded like the echo of the preceding discharge, and six repeating rifles all poured their storm of leaden hail into the outlaws' line.

The havoc was great, although in order to lessen the effect of the volley, which he had expected, Captain Vermilion had cautioned his men to spread out as far as possible.

Eight of the brigands went down under the murderous fire, either dead, badly wounded, or dismounted by reason of their horses being killed under them.

The charge came to an inglorious end, the unhurt outlaws pulled their horses up so short that the animals were forced back upon their haunches.

The outlaw chief seemed to bear a charmed life, for although three of the best marksmen in the skirmish line had selected him for a target, he escaped without a single scratch.

A yell of triumph came from the townsmen

as they witnessed the destructive effect of their fire.

They became wild with the desire to come to close quarters with the foe.

Shouting at the top of their lungs they rushed forward.

The outlaws, now totally demoralized, banged away with their revolvers, a fire which did no particular damage, and then they wheeled their horses around and fled, the townsmen who had repeating rifles, hastening the flight of the discomfited outlaws with another volley, but this time as the victors did not stop to take good aim the balls whistled high over the heads of the fleeing horsemen.

The fight had not taken as many minutes as we have occupied in describing it; and never was there as bloody a victory so easily won.

The outlaws who were in ambush to cut off the retreat of the men in the hunter's cabin had a good view of the fight and were dismayed at the defeat of their comrades.

They left their hiding-places, ran to where their horses had been left in charge of the half-breed and hastily mounted.

The fire had just commenced to cut into the wall and roof of the cabin, but there was no time now to pay any more attention to the men within the house.

The eight men formed in line on the road, and hardly had they got into position when the leader of the brigands dashed up to them, making a detour back of the ruined cabin so as to avoid the fire of the ambushed men.

"We are beaten, boys!" Captain Vermilion cried hoarsely. "These scoundrels are fighting like devils! We cannot do anything against their guns!"

"We had better be off as soon as possible!" counseled White, who was appalled by the disaster which had occurred.

"Yes, flight is all that is left us; we were fools to risk a battle with this superior and better-armed force, but they behaved so like curs when we rescued Comanche Joe that I had no idea they would fight."

"Caramba! it has cost us the lives of some of the best men in our band!"

The townsmen, flushed with their victory were rushing onward, and had approached near enough for the riflemen to open fire again, but they were hardly within range and the bullets fell short.

The hint that it was time to get out was not lost upon the outlaws though.

"Accursed town! I will yet be revenged upon you for this night's slaughter!" the outlaw chief cried, rising in his saddle and shaking his clinched fist in the direction of Pedroville.

Then the brigands put spurs to their horses and galloped off at a brisk pace, the riflemen blazing away at them, but too far off to do any damage.

The outlaws being well mounted, there was no possibility that they could be overtaken by the victors, and soon they disappeared in the distance.

The skirmishers came to a halt at the old hunter's cabin, and their amazement was great when the Lone Hand and the Bostonian made their appearance through the window.

The mystery of the desperate defense of the building was explained now, and old man Smith's reputation as a hero was demolished even more quickly than it had been created.

"Thunderation!" cried the marshal, who was one of the skirmishers, having succeeded in getting a shot-gun from one of the citizens who was too old to use it. "And it was you two all the time who stood the scoundrels off, and hyer we have been a-chinning the praises of that old galoot of a Smith!"

"Yes, we borrowed the use of the cabin. I had an idea that the outlaws would attempt to rescue the half-breed, and so we laid in wait for them," the Lone Hand explained.

"I am afraid the old man will not thank us for it, though, for it is going to cause the destruction of his house, I fear."

"The thing is well afire," the marshal remarked.

"Yes, lend a hand, and let us see if we can't put it out."

But just as the speech was made the flames burst through the roof, and it was plain the house was doomed.

All that the men could do was to remove the few articles which were within the building.

"The old man will curse the chance which led us to select his property as a headquarters," the Lone Hand remarked, as he watched the flames devour the cabin.

"Oh, that is all right!" the marshal remarked. "The old thing isn't worth more'n fifty dollars anyway, and seeing as how it kinder led to our skinning the outlaws, I reckon the citizens will chip in and make up a purse for the old man."

"I feel so good about it that I'll give five dollars myself!"

"Well, I'll go ten, and I reckon it will not be much trouble to raise the rest," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Oh, that is all right!" Doc Mortimer exclaimed. "Do not trouble your mind about

that. I'll chip in ten, too; and, colonel, you have some sand about you in a case of this kind."

"You bet!" cried the rancher. "I'll give fifty dollars, and put the house up on my own hook."

"No, you won't!" exclaimed the sport. "You must not play the hog. You must not set the 'ante' so high that none of the rest of the boys can 'come in.'"

"Ten is enough for you, colonel, and the other forty you can keep, to lose to me at poker!"

There was a laugh at this remark, for it was well known that the colonel in this way usually supplied Mortimer with his loose change.

As nothing could be done but to let the house burn, the party retraced their steps to where the mayor and the main body had halted on the battle-field, and were examining the dead and wounded outlaws.

"I reckon Pedroville has redeemed herself," Doc Mortimer exclaimed with a natural pride as the party walked along. "I have seen some pretty little fights in my time, but this one to-night takes the cake."

"The cake! Hang it, man, it captures the whole bake-shop!" the colonel exclaimed.

"Yes, and if we hadn't acted so like a pack of fools before, we would not have whipped them so badly," Mortimer remarked.

"They reckoned we would be sure to run when they charged, or else they never would have come on so boldly. I reckon we will all have to apply for commissions in the Rangers, or else hire ourselves out as outlaw-killers."

By this time they had reached the other party and they, too, were astonished when they discovered that it was the Bostonian and the Lone Hand who had held old Smith's cabin.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

"WELL, I thought it was strange," the mayor remarked. "Yes, sir, I reckoned that it was just bordering on the miraculous for old man Smith to make such a fight, for, from what I know of the old man, I should reckon that in a case of this kind the cuss would be more apt to take to the woods than to attempt to defend his property, much less get into a fight when he could just as well keep out of it."

"I think the outlaws have got a lesson this night which will be apt to make them steer clear of Pedroville in the future," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Well, if they don't, they are bigger fools than I take them to be," the mayor rejoined.

"Why, we have laid out about two-thirds of the entire party, and nearly all the men are killed outright, too."

"For a small fight this has been the bloodiest one I ever heard of," the Lone Hand observed.

"That is because the galoots were plucky and charged at us as if they reckoned there wasn't no hereafter, anyway," Doc Mortimer remarked.

"As you came up I was just going to order an examination to be made of the outlaws to see if we could recognize any of them."

"That is a good idea," the Lone Hand remarked. "I should not be surprised if some discoveries were made, for it is always the game of these fellows to have spies in the villages near which they operate."

"That was my idea," the mayor observed.

Then they proceeded to make the examination.

First they removed the masks from the faces of the dead men, but as face after face was uncovered—the most of them desperate-looking ruffians whose countenances would have been enough almost to have sent them to the gallows in any civilized community—the bystanders shook their heads, for not one of them was recognized.

"I reckon we are going to have our labor for our pains," the mayor remarked.

"Some of the wounded men may pan out better," Doc Mortimer remarked.

"I will go you an even bet of five dollars that they don't," Colonel Bellingham observed, always ready for a wager, and always glad of a chance to rope the sport into one, although it was well known that, as a general thing, Doc Mortimer won.

That did not make any difference to the colonel though, for he had faith that in time his luck would bring him out a winner.

"Five dollars, en?" exclaimed the sport reflectively. "Hold on for a moment, if you please, Mr. Mayor, until we arrange this little thing."

"Mr. Mayor, it is desirable, I presume, that one of these fellows should be recognized?"

"Yes, it is, for, maybe, we would be able to get some information out of him."

"All right, that is what I thought, and in order to further the interest of the town I will go you the five dollars, colonel."

"What in the name of thunder has that got to do with the interests of Pedroville?" cried Colonel Bellingham in decided wonder.

"Why, if you bet me five dollars that a man will not be recognized, it is a dead sure thing that one will be. You know you never win by any possible chance when you bet with me, colonel!"

The rancher didn't see it in that light, and said so, but the bystanders did, and there was a general smile at the cool assumption of the sport.

"The Doc will win," the Lone Hand said in the ear of Webster.

"What makes you think so?"

"That big fellow in the pea-jacket, who is groaning so, is no stranger to the town," and the speaker directed the Bostonian's attention to one of the outlaws who lay apart from the rest, flat on his face, and who would have been taken for a dead man if he had not groaned every now and then.

One by one the wounded men were examined, each face proving to be that of a stranger as the mask was removed, until the big fellow in the pea-jacket alone was left.

The colonel was jubilant.

"Get your five dollars ready, Doc!" he exclaimed, slapping the sport on the shoulder, "there is only one man left."

"I know it, but he is the man!"

"Nonsense."

"Go you another five dollars on it!"

"It's a bet."

The townsmen raised the man to a sitting posture, removed his mask, and the face of the Englishman who had been so soundly thrashed by the Lone Hand was revealed.

Colonel Bellingham gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Well, may I be hanged!" he cried.

"You are bung up for ten dollars!" Doc Mortimer replied in a business-like way.

"Hello, hello!" cried the marshal, as his eyes fell upon the face of the man, "I reckon I have seen you before."

"Did I not say that this man was set on to attack me by the outlaws?" the Lone Hand remarked to the Bostonian.

"Yes, your calculations in regard to these outlaws have been wonderfully correct," the other replied.

"Wal, old boss, you are in a pretty tight place," the marshal continued.

"Do you know this fellow?" asked the mayor.

"You bet!" responded the official, "he was in Pedroville to-day. Said he had been ranching up the Rio Grande and was down this way looking after a job, but I don't remember the galoot's name, if I ever heard it."

"What is your handle?" demanded the mayor.

"Bill Tozer, otherwise known as the Birmingham Infant," the sport answered sulkily.

"Well, Mister Tozer, or Mister Birmingham Infant, whichever you like, you are in a pretty tight place hyer."

"Yes, I was a fool to let these fellers persuade me into going into this thing; but, then, I really did not git the hang of it, and hadn't any idea that they were as bad as they have turned out to be."

"Ah, I see you are not an old member of the outlaw band?" Hamilton inquired, quite pleasantly, and with his keen eyes fixed intently upon the face of the man.

"Lord bless you, no!" Tozer exclaimed, trying to appear as innocent as possible. "I was tramping about the country, looking for a job, and I happened to go to a ranch where I met these coves—of course they wasn't rigged out then as they are now—and they told me I could have a fine job with them."

"They said that they sailed under false colors once in a while, and did not mind helping themselves to anything, horses or cattle, that they found running around; but I see now that I got into a regular nest of land pirates."

"Mr. Mayor," said the Lone Hand, stepping forward at this point, "I would like to ask this man a few questions, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not! Glad to be able to oblige you, Mr. Hand."

"I came in contact with the fellow to-day," the Lone Hand explained. "He picked a quarrel with me in the hotel, and I had to hammer the man to satisfy him."

"And you did it beautifully, too, Mr. Hand!" exclaimed Doc Mortimer. "I have seldom seen a neater performance; but the rate of admission was rather high for some of the spectators. For instance, it cost my bosom friend hyer, Colonel Bellingham, quite a number of ducats to come in."

The rancher growled in answer to the joke.

"He was at the jail to-day to see the coffee-colored nigger!" exclaimed Slab Kellogg, the jailer, who was one of the party. "He said he had been robbed by the Red Glove Raiders, and he wanted to see if he could identify Comanche Joe."

"And he did recognize him, of course?" the Lone Hand said.

"Oh, yes, the moment he set eyes onto him."

"Do you see the dodge, mayor?" the Lone Hand asked. "He came in to warn the half-breed that his friends were looking out for him, and that he would be rescued. How does this yarn about his being robbed by the Red Glove Raiders agree with his story that he joined the band in ignorance of their true character?"

"Tight place, Mister Infant, tight place!" the mayor exclaimed, with a shake of the head.

The fellow saw that he had made a blunder, and he attempted to get out of it.

"Oh, I knew that they were a leetle off, but I didn't think they were near as bad as they turned out to be."

"By the way, where are you wounded?" inquired the mayor, abruptly, as the thought came to him that the man had stopped groaning, and seemed to be all right.

"Wa-al, I reckon I ain't so badly hurt as I thought I was," the fellow admitted. "My boss got plugged and threw me a reg'lar bu'ster, and when I struck the ground I felt as if all my insides were knocked out of me, but now I am kinder gitting over it, and I reckon I will be able to tackle my fodder for some time yet."

"Well, that depends upon circumstances over which I don't think you will have much control," observed the Lone Hand.

"Marshal, will you have the kindness to take some of the lariats from these dead horses and rig a line so we can string this fellow up?"

"With the greatest pleasure in life," cried the official, proceeding immediately to his task, in which he was aided by the bystanders.

"Hello, hello! w'ot are you going to do?" cried the desperado in alarm.

"Give you a chance to die, as your comrades here have died, with your boots on," the Lone Hand replied, sternly.

"You don't mean to say that you are going to hang me?"

"I reckon that is the programme," the mayor exclaimed, briskly.

"But I hain't had no trial," the man protested, beginning to grow pale.

"What need of a trial for a red-handed desperado like you?" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"Great king! you ain't a-going to swing a man up without giving him any time to prepare himself?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, you don't need any preparation, but you ought to have thought of that before you became a member of a band of murderous outlaws," the mayor replied.

"Oh, gentlemen, I ain't fit to die, for I have been an awful guilty man. Give me two or three days to get ready."

"I reckon that in your time you have sent a good many men into the other world without giving them any time to get ready," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Yes; but 'ces I ain't done w'ot was right that ain't no reason why you shouldn't have some mercy," the man pleaded, glancing around anxiously, as if he hoped to catch sight of a friendly face.

But his eyes fell upon naught but stern countenances, for there was not a man in that assemblage who did not believe he richly deserved to die.

"Spare my life! Don't hang me, and I will tell you all I know about the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande!" the ruffian cried.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A CONFESSION.

THIS was the point to which the Lone Hand desired to bring the man, and that was why he proposed to hang him.

"Well, I don't know whether your information will be of any value or not," the man-hunter remarked.

"I will tell you all I know, and spit it out as straight as a string," the Englishman exclaimed, eagerly.

"I lied to you when I said that I had just joined the band, for I have been with them nigh onto six months."

"Oh, I did not take any stock in your statement, so you did not deceive me," the Lone Hand replied.

"I kin tell you whar the gang has their headquarters up in the mountains, and will lead a party right to the place, if you want me to guide you."

"Well, we might try it on," the mayor remarked. "But I reckon we will not ketch our game, though, for the outlaws are no fools. They know we have taken some of the gang prisoners, and they will be apt to have a suspicion that their secrets will be given away."

"Wa-al, of course, I don't know nothing about that," the fellow admitted.

"I will lead you to whar they hang out, and if they ain't thar, it won't be my fault. I will do all I can to save my neck!"

"You are not as plucky as the half-breed, Comanche Joe," the mayor remarked in a tone of disparagement.

"Ain't I?" the ruffian growled.

"No, for he refused to betray his pards, even when we had the rope ready to put around his neck."

"Don't you know the reason why?" snarled the Englishman.

"I suppose you mean that he thought he would be rescued."

"He knew durned well he was going to be, for I brought him the warning. He understood that the gang were near at hand, and that at the last moment they would fetch him out of the scrape, but I know that thar ain't a ghost of a show for me. The band hadn't been whipped out of their boots then, and the most of the best men in it laid out colder'n a wedge."

"Yes, the situation is different," the Lone Hand admitted. "Well, Mr. Mayor, what do you say to accepting this man's proposal? It seems to me that he makes a pretty fair offer."

"Well, I reckon I will do about as you say," Hamilton replied. "You appear to understand how to run this thing, and I have faith in your judgment."

"How is that, gentlemen—is that about squar?" he asked, appealing to the crowd.

There was not a dissenting voice, for the Lone Hand had impressed the people as being the man of all men to run a thing of this kind.

"Of course I am not able to say how valuable to us his information may be, but if he does the best in his power we ought not to complain."

"That is about right, it seems to me," the mayor remarked.

"Yes, yes, that's squar!" came in loud murmurs from the bystanders.

"Is it a bargain?" asked the Englishman, anxiously.

"Yes, it is a go!" the Lone Hand answered.

"All right, I am ready to make a clean breast of it and tell all I know," and as he spoke, Tozer rose slowly to his feet.

The man had not been playing 'possum, although he had escaped the fight without a wound.

But, as he had said, his horse had pitched him over his head—he had got a tremendous fall, and, for a time, about all his senses had been knocked out of him.

"Now, then, what is the name of the outlaw leader?" the Lone Hand asked.

"The captain of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande?"

"Yes."

"Captain Vermilion."

"That I know, but what is his real name?"

"Now you have got me," the Englishman replied, scrubbing his head, thoughtfully.

"Don't you know it?" and the Lone Hand fixed his piercing eyes full on the face of the man, eager to detect whether he was speaking the truth or not.

"No, and I reckon that's only one man in the band who does."

"And which one is that?"

"The lieutenant, White."

"What else besides White?"

"Oh, that ain't his name at all, he is a Yankee called Perkins, but all the principal men in the band are designated by colors. Perkins was White, I am Black, and Comanche Joe is Red," the Englishman explained.

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Perkins was the feller w'ot runs the band," Tozer continued. "The captain never made his appearance except when there was work on hand, and he always wore a mask over his face."

"So as to conceal his identity even from the men of his own band?"

"Yes, there couldn't any of the gang betray him, for no one knew who he was, excepting the lieutenant, White, as I said afore."

"All orders came through White, and he arranged everything, excepting when there was a move to be made, and then the captain made his appearance and took command."

"Say, are you giving us this straight?" exclaimed the mayor, at this point.

"I wish I may die if I ain't! As straight as a string!" the Englishman protested.

"Was it White who sent you into Pedroville?"

"The very same."

"With instructions to warn the half-breed that he would be rescued?"

"Oh, yes, and I delivered the message right afore two galoots who never smoked the trick!"

The marshal and the jailer scowled at this point, for the remembrance was not pleasant.

"And what were your intentions in regard to me?"

"I was given your description—told to hunt you up and pick a quarrel with you. The captain and White together arranged the matter, and they thought I had better fight you with a knife or pistol, but I thought I could lay you out with my fists, and they finally told me to go ahead, for they said that if you were battered so as to be laid up for a month, or so, it would be all right, 'cos in that time they would have a chance to play their little game."

"Did they give any reason why I was thus singled out to be laid out?"

"No, only that you was a man likely to be dangerous, and that if you were not put out of the way would be likely to make trouble, and I reckon the two galoots knew what they were a-talking about," the fellow added, with a rueful glance at the battle-field, "for if we hadn't stopped to git you out of the cabin this hyar thing wouldn't have happened."

"These outlaws have spies in Pedroville, I believe, who warn them in regard to all that goes on."

"I reckon so, for they are posted."

"Have you any idea in regard to who the spies are?"

"Nary time."

"You were not ordered to consult with any one when you were sent into the town?"

"No, I reckon a secret like that wouldn't be trusted to any of the band."

"How long will it take to reach the outlaws' refuge in the mountains?"

"About an hour, if the hosses are good."

"Aha! it is nearer then than I thought."

Then the Lone Hand drew the mayor to one side and held a brief conference with him.

"I think the fellow has spoken the truth," he said, "and that we can rely upon it, but the information is not particularly valuable, only showing that the outlaws work with extreme caution, and from the fact that the leader is so careful to keep his identity disguised, it is possible that he passes unsuspected right in the streets of Pedroville, or any other village near which the band is operating."

"It certainly looks like it," the mayor remarked.

"And yet I cannot recall a single suspicious man in the town—any new-comer, I mean."

"Possibly the man is one who would be the last to be suspected," the Lone Hand suggested.

"Yes, that is true, for there is no doubt the fellow is a big thing in the outlaw way."

"The only plan now is to keep our eyes and ears open. The band may leave this section after this bloody defeat, or the desire for revenge may be powerful enough to cause them to remain."

"Well, the first move I should think would be to send an expedition to visit the outlaws' retreat," the mayor remarked.

"By sending a strong force, if we were lucky enough to surprise the scoundrels, we might be able to almost exterminate them."

"Yes, there is a chance, but I do not regard it as being probable that we can succeed in surprising them," the Lone Hand remarked.

"The fellows will be apt to suspect that some of their captured men may betray the secret of their ranch," he added, "and, to my thinking, they will be apt to seek new quarters, but it will not do any hurt to try the experiment."

"That is my idea; it will show them, anyway, that we are hot after them, for there will be some one in the neighborhood sure to carry the news of the raid to them."

"Yes, undoubtedly, and I should advise that you get at the thing as soon as possible. I suppose there will not be any difficulty in getting horses?"

"Why, my own ranch can almost mount a regiment, and on mighty good critters, too!" the mayor declared.

"Well, we will get right at it, then. By the way, there's one question I forgot to ask this fellow, and I will put it to him now."

The pair returned to the rest.

"By the way, have you noticed whether this lieutenant, White, as you call him, was killed or captured?" the Lone Hand asked of the big fellow.

"Oh, no, he wasn't in this fight at all!" the man declared. "Oh, he is a sly one, I tell you! What that Yankee don't know ain't worth knowing! He was in command of the party that went to get you out of the house. It looks as if he smelt out the blood of this hyer thing and didn't want any of it in his his'n."

The mayor made a brief speech to the crowd, called for volunteers to go upon the expedition, and every man present offered his services.

But the Lone Hand said it would not be good policy to leave the town unguarded and so only some twenty men were selected.

These, with the mayor, the Lone Hand and the prisoner, hurried to the town to procure horses.

Within an hour all preparations were made and then the expedition took the road.

But, notwithstanding their haste, they were too late; the birds had flown!

The ranch was deserted, although there were signs which showed that the Red Glove Raiders had recently been there.

"Well, this doesn't end the hunt," the Lone Hand observed. "For since I have entered upon this work I reckon I will stick at it until the band is exterminated!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNAVAILING SEARCH.

THE fight of the Pedroville men with the outlaws created a deal of excitement throughout the county, as was only natural under the circumstances, and the county officers came in haste to the town, anxious to learn all the particulars.

It was their idea too that from the prisoners who had been taken in the fight they would be able to gain information which would enable them to hunt down the rest of the band.

The prisoners knowing that they were in a tight place, and each man coming to the conclusion that if he did not betray his pals some of the rest would be certain to do so, were only too glad to tell all they knew.

But, as the reader has doubtless surmised, the authorities did not succeed in gaining any information of value.

None of the outlaws were able to tell anything more than the Englishman, Bill Tozer, had already revealed.

The chief of the band, the dashing Captain Vermilion, had managed to conceal his identity so well that even the outlaws of the gang were not able to guess who he really was.

The county officials were baffled but not discouraged.

A company of rangers had been ordered to the neighborhood and they arrived while the investigation was going on.

The captain was a loud-mouthed fellow, a man with a wonderful opinion of his own abilities, and he loudly proclaimed there was not the least doubt that he would "bag" all the rest of the marauders within a week.

When the rangers arrived there was a consultation held to decide in regard to the best mode of proceeding; the Mayor of Pedroville, Jack Hamilton, suggested that the Lone Hand be invited to the conference.

The mayor had a great deal of faith in the abilities of the stranger, and openly said that if it had not been his attack on the outlaws, which resulted in detaining them, the Pedroville men would not have had the fight with the gang which resulted so disastrously to the marauders.

But the captain of the rangers laughed at the idea.

As he expressed it, the thought of calling in a stranger, whom no one knew anything about, was ridiculous.

He had had years of experience in hunting and wiping out just such outlaw gangs, and he "reckoned" he could do the trick without having to ask advice of every Tom, Dick and Harry that came along.

The mayor did not like the tone in which the officer spoke and answered rather tartly, and if it had not been for the interference of the rest there would undoubtedly have been trouble between the two men.

As it was, a peace was patched up and the consultation proceeded.

It did not amount to anything, though, for the captain of the rangers was a self-willed fellow, who wanted to have everything his own way, and was not at all inclined to listen to suggestions from anybody else.

He had perfect confidence that he could hunt the outlaws down with his own command, who were used to the business, as he said, and did not need assistance from the citizens.

And then, to use the vernacular, Pedroville "got up on its ear."

The town was not anxious to put its spoon in anybody else's soup, so the citizens loudly declared. They had not sent for assistance; they did not need any durned rangers in theirs; they could hoe their own row, and as far as the outlaws were concerned, they had whipped them out of their boots, and they did not believe that that gang or any other would be apt to "fool" around Pedroville much.

These remarks, of course, came to the ears of the captain of the rangers, and he was at once put upon his metal, and the way in which he scoured the country around in search of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande was a caution.

The search was a fruitless one though, for not the slightest trace of the outlaws could be found, and so, at last, he was forced to believe that the brigands, dismayed by their overwhelming defeat by the citizens of Pedroville, had fled across the Rio Grande and found refuge on Mexican soil.

The captain of the rangers did not come to this opinion until he had spent a good two weeks in the search and, as he declared, been over forty miles around the junction of Pedro Creek and the Rio Grande, with the exception of the Mexican territory on the other bank of the river.

"The fact is," he said complacently, "the rascals got wind that I was on their track, and they dusted."

And at this statement Pedroville haw-hawed loudly.

"The fact is, we whipped 'em so badly, that they didn't keer to linger 'round this burg!" the town declared.

The prisoners were carried to the county seat, and the rangers departed with them, not sorry to get out of the town, for the citizens, during the last week, had indulged in some extremely uncomplimentary remarks.

During this time the Lone Hand had bought a double-barreled shot-gun, and amused himself by riding around the country in search of game; so he said, and as he seldom returned empty-handed, no one thought anything strange of the matter.

But the game he really sought, though, was the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande.

He had no faith in the ability of the ranger captain, and thought there was a good chance that the outlaws might be clever enough to evade his search.

But the Lone Hand could find no more trace of the outlaws than the others, and so he came to the conclusion that they had crossed the river and found refuge on Mexican soil.

But the fact that it was Mexican territory did not prevent the Lone Hand from crossing the river and pursuing his search after "game" on the other side.

The quest was a fruitless one though, as far as

the game that he most desired to find was concerned.

The outlaws had evidently retired to the interior, so as to be safe from all pursuit, that is if the land still existed.

There was a probability, of course, that discouraged by the terrible loss which they had sustained, the outlaw gang had disbanded, and each man gone on his individual way.

The Lone Hand hardly believed this though, and reasoned that the scoundrels were just keeping quiet until the excitement cooled down and the rangers departed.

During these two weeks the Lone Hand and the Bostonian had posed as the lions of the town, for the citizens thought they could not do enough for the men who had so distinguished themselves.

Particularly friendly was the rancher, Miguel Aldama, and the mayor, Jack Hamilton, and whenever the two visited the mansion of either one, Mercedes Aldama and Cordelia Hamilton with bright smiles and cheerful looks, did their best to make them welcome; and as the pairs visited these two houses more often than anywhere else in Pedrovilla the gossips soon began to talk, particularly when it was noticed that the young ladies seldom allowed a day to pass without discovering that they needed something from the old Jew's store.

Two weeks more went by.

The Lone Hand kept up his shooting excursions, varied now by trips to examine property offered for sale.

He still kept up the fiction that he intended to purchase a ranch in the neighborhood of Pedrovilla if he could succeed in getting a good bargain.

Of course all the time he was keeping a keen watch for any traces of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande.

It was the last Saturday of the month, and the Lone Hand sat in the apartment at the hotel jointly occupied by himself and the Bostonian, smoking a cigar.

Just as the clock struck ten Webster entered.

"Well, I am through with the Jew!" he declared.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," the other replied, helping himself to a chair. "You know I told you that I expected we would have a quarrel before long. I have not been satisfied with Oppenheim for some time, and I know he has not been satisfied with me."

"Well, I imagined as much, although you have never said much about it."

"Well, I am not a talker, you know, and as I made up my mind to hold on until my month was up, I resolved to keep quiet."

"You cannot get along with him?"

"No, the Jew is an old rascal, and he wants a rascal for a clerk; one who will lie about the goods and descend to any mean trick in order to make a sale."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"Well, I do not calculate to get my living in that way!" Webster exclaimed, decidedly.

"I come of a pretty good family in Boston, although my branch of it have no money to speak of, but when I left home and came West to seek my fortune—"

"Grow up with the country!" the Lone Hand ejaculated.

"Exactly; I did not anticipate that I should not be able to do anything better than clerk in a country store, but I got into a rut, after getting out here and have been on it ever since."

"Yes, I know how that is."

"In my previous position I got along very well. The proprietor was a good sort of man, considerable of a gentleman, and the situation was not unpleasant, but this old Jew is a rascal all the way through, and no honest man can possibly get along with him."

"He has some miserable prints in the store, stuff which will not wash, and because I told a customer to-day that I could not guarantee them to be fast colors, the old man took me to task to-night, and I told him plainly and promptly exactly what I thought of him, and he did not like it a bit, I tell you."

"And then you parted company?"

"We did! I am a sick man no longer, but have fully recovered my health and strength, and I know I can get a place on some of the ranches."

"Try Aldama," suggested the Lone Hand, with a quiet smile.

Webster laughed.

"That is exactly what I am going to do. Cordelia Hamilton asked me this afternoon why I did not, and said she knew that Mr. Aldama needed just such a man as I am. She and Mercedes Aldama were in the store together."

"And what did Mercedes say?"

"Oh, she did not hear the conversation. Cordelia spoke to me while Mercedes was busy at the other end of the store, where Oppenheim was showing her some goods."

"And did you tell her that you thought of changing?"

"Yes; and she wanted me to promise that I would apply to Aldama before trying elsewhere."

"And you did so, of course."

"Oh, yes."

"Webster, you have made a decided impression upon Miss Aldama, and in this matter Miss Hamilton was speaking for her friend's sake. I have no doubt you will be able to get a position on the Aldama ranch, and in time marry Aldama's daughter."

"Well, I will frankly own that I am in love with Mercedes, and should be glad to win her," the Bostonian replied.

"It only depends upon yourself; go in and win."

"And you undoubtedly will be successful with Cordelia Hamilton, if you care for her, for she certainly looks with a favorable eye upon you," Webster remarked.

The Lone Hand shook his head.

"Oh, but it is the truth!" the Bostonian persisted. "There is no doubt about it. Can't you see that the lady likes you?"

"Yes, she is always very pleasant and agreeable, but I am a little afraid the girl is something of a flirt. I am a stranger, and she considers me fair game."

"She is lively, I know, and I should not be surprised if she is rather inclined to flirt, but in this case I believe she is in earnest."

"I hope not, for I am not a marrying man, and I trust the lady will not fix her affections upon me. Some years ago I won a jewel of a woman; death snatched her from me, and since that time I have not cared for the society of the softer sex. My heart is seared, and the one love will be enough for my life, I think."

The Bostonian saw that the subject was a painful one, and so he said no more.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

WEBSTER applied to Aldama on the day that succeeded the night on which the conversation occurred, described in our last chapter.

The old gentleman was really in need of an assistant—a sort of managing man, who could take the work from his shoulders—and he and the Bostonian soon made a bargain.

Miguel Aldama was neither blind nor dull-witted; he had seen that his daughter and the young man had become great friends, and he was not sorry to be able to afford them an opportunity to come together, for he had taken a liking to the Bostonian, for he saw that he was a true gentleman, far superior to the average young man of the day.

So the Lone Hand was deprived of his companion; but as he had become acquainted with everybody in the town, and his society was much sought after, he had no opportunity to become lonesome.

Maurice Moreno, in particular, tried to be particularly agreeable.

It was a source of great annoyance to this gentleman, as he often declared, that he had not had an opportunity to take part in the fight which resulted so disastrously to the outlaws.

But he had not been warned by the marshal to take part in the lynching, and through some oversight, no one had been thoughtful enough to wake him up so he could take part in the advance of the Pedrovilla men; in fact, he knew nothing of the matter until the next morning, and was much astonished when he learned what had taken place.

The Lone Hand appeared to be very much impressed with Moreno, and the two spent much time together.

In fact, so intimate with the young man did the Lone Hand become that he confided to him his intention to settle in Pedrovilla, if he could find a ranch in the neighborhood to suit him.

Thereupon, Moreno suggested that the advice of the money-lender, Peter Raymond, be sought, for, as Moreno observed:

"He lends money all over the county, and therefore is not only as good a judge of property as you can possibly find, but, from his knowledge of how men are situated, he would be apt to know of some place which could be purchased on favorable terms."

The Lone Hand thought the idea a good one, and so he consulted the money-lender.

That gentleman received the stranger in the most gracious manner.

Raymond said he would be delighted to oblige him, and there was no doubt he would be able to find something to suit him, for his knowledge of the ranches in the neighborhood of Pedrovilla was greater, he was sure, than that of any man in the town.

In a day or two he was going to take a trip to look after some money matters, and he would keep his eyes open for a desirable ranch.

The Lone Hand thanked him, and said he would be quite willing to pay liberally for any service that might be rendered.

Raymond said his charge would be reasonable, and this brought the interview to an end.

A week or so after, one evening while the Lone Hand was sitting in the office of the hotel, glancing over a newspaper which had just arrived, the money-lender entered.

He was evidently in search of the Lone Hand, for he immediately approached and greeted him.

"Well, I think I have found a place that will suit you," Raymond announced as he helped himself to a chair.

"Glad to hear it," said the Lone Hand, laying aside his paper.

"It is a very fine place and can be bought cheap."

"That is exactly what I am looking for."

"It is about ten miles up the river; the land is good, the water excellent, and the buildings in fair condition."

"That is a fine outlook!"

"There is a little stock on the place which can be had at a fair price. You see the owner is in difficulties and is obliged to give it up," the money-lender exclaimed.

"It is the old story, you know, the man tried to do too much on too little capital and the usual result followed."

"Yes, I see; he can't stand the press and is obliged to get out."

"Exactly; it is only a question of time now. The place is mortgaged for almost as much as it is worth, and he can't carry the load any longer. If he does not succeed in selling out, the place will be taken away from him under fore-closure."

"You hold the mortgage, I presume?"

"Yes, and I have carried the man just about as long as I can. I rather pride myself on the fact that I do not drive a hard bargain with my customers, but always try to be as accommodating as I can. In this case, if the man stood any chance of pulling through I would do all I could to help him, but it is of no use for him to try, and the longer he stays on the place the poorer he will be for he has not got the capital to work with, and then he is not the kind of man to run so big a ranch."

"It is too much for him, eh?"

"Oh, yes, he is an indolent fellow; no push or derive ahead to him. He is from Mexico and was born tired, I reckon."

"Well, from your description I should think this place is about what I want and I should like to take a look at it."

"Suppose we take a trip up there to-morrow?" the money-lender suggested.

"All right, that will suit me."

"Very well, we will go to-morrow then," and the money-lender rose.

"What is the name of the ranch?"

"The Michael Ortiz place. It is about ten miles up the river and lies a mile back from the Rio Grande."

"All right; say we start about eight to-morrow morning."

"Eight o'clock will suit me."

And the money-lender departed.

The Lone Hand looked after him for a moment, a peculiar smile upon his stern face.

"This money-lender is really an extremely obliging gentleman," he remarked. "Of course he expects to make some money out of the transaction and that is why he has acted so promptly."

"The Michael Ortiz Ranch, eh? A Mexican, and is there anything suspicious about that?" And the Lone Hand laughed quietly to himself as he put the question.

"Oh, no, of course not. There are plenty of Mexicans, or men of Mexican descent, all along the Texan side of the Rio Grande."

"By the way, I wonder if the landlord here knows anything of this ranch? I must inquire. It would not be a bad idea, either, to interview the old Jew, Oppenheim, on this subject. As the principal storekeeper in the place, he is undoubtedly acquainted with this Michael Ortiz, and from these two men I may be able to secure valuable information."

And then the man-hunter laughed quietly for a moment.

"If I was given to betting now, I think I should be inclined to wager a large amount of cash that not only will the landlord and the Jew know of this Michael Ortiz Ranch, but they will recommend it in the highest manner, and advise me by all means to go and look at the place, as I will find it to be a great bargain."

"Of course, this will be entirely disinterested advice on their part, for there is not any reason why they should want me to look at the property."

"I will test the truth of my surmise at once."

Then the Lone Hand arose and sought the landlord.

As he had expected, Landlord Plunkett was well acquainted with the property, although he said he did not know much about the present owner.

The ranch was an excellent one, he declared, and he did not believe that a better property could be found in the neighborhood, and by all means he would advise that an examination of it should be made.

Then the Lone Hand sought the old Jew.

Oppenheim talked about the same as the landlord.

He knew the ranch, but not much about the owner, excepting that his neighbors said he was no rancher, and that he was running the place down.

"It was a good investment, mine fr'en', go for it," was the Jew's advice.

"As I expected," the Lone Hand soliloquized,

as he walked back to the hotel. "I should have won my bet. And now let me see. While I am examining this ranch, would it not be a good idea for some friends of mine to make up a hunting party and look for game in that direction? I think it would."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A TRAP.

PROMPT to the minute at the appointed time came the money-lender.

The Lone Hand was ready, and the two men mounted their horses and set out.

They took the up-river trail, and as they rode along Raymond sounded the praises of the ranch which they were about to visit.

According to his description, it was about as fine a piece of property as could be found in the country, although the present owner had allowed it to run down.

"I shall make allowances for that, of course," the Lone Hand remarked.

"By the way, this place is rather isolated, isn't it?" he remarked.

Now no one had given him this information but he had jumped to the conclusion, and no sooner were the words spoken than he saw the money-lender was slightly disturbed by the remark.

"Well, sir, I don't think so," Raymond replied, slowly. "It can hardly be termed isolated. The ranches, you know, in this section are not close together, of course, but that is all the better, as it affords free pasturage."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"But I say, who told you that the ranch was lonely?" the money-lender inquired, his curiosity evidently excited.

"Well, really, I couldn't tell you who it was," the Lone Hand answered, after pretending to think over the matter for a moment.

"It was some one I reckon whom I was talking to in the hotel, and he further said that this Michael Ortiz did not bear a good reputation."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Raymond, now visibly disturbed. "The man who said such a thing as that is a liar, or else he didn't know what he was talking about!"

"Ortiz bears as good a reputation as any man in the neighborhood! All that anybody can say with truth in regard to him is that he does not attend to his ranch as he ought to, and is too fond of crossing the river to attend the Mexican cock-fights and similar sports."

"Nothing very wrong in that," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Certainly not."

"This party who was talking with me about Ortiz spoke very badly about him," the Arkansian resumed. "In fact, he could not have spoken much worse if Ortiz had been one of these outlaws who call themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande."

This was a home-thrust, although delivered in the most careless manner, and the money-lender winced, perceptibly.

"Oh, how extremely absurd!" he exclaimed. "I never heard of anything more ridiculous in my life, but it only shows how people will talk."

"Then there isn't any truth in the statement?"

"Not the slightest!"

"And Ortiz is not a member of the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande?"

Again the money-lender winced; but the questions were put in such an innocent way that he had no suspicion that the talkative Pedrovillian was but a venture of the Lone Hand's imagination.

"Such an accusation is supremely ridiculous!" the money-lender declared. "And the man who made it was either drunk or some bitter enemy of Ortiz who was anxious to do him harm. The man is no more a member, or a confederate of the outlaws, than I am."

"Well, I thought the story was too improbable to be true."

"Oh it is ridiculous, as I said before, and the man was evidently some enemy of Ortiz, but it is a mighty strange thing that he should make such an accusation against him," the money-lender remarked, evidently much troubled by the circumstance. "I do not understand it at all," he continued, "for Ortiz is a man about whom very little is known in Pedroville. In fact, I do not believe he has been in the town a dozen times since he has lived on the ranch. Being a Mexican, when he seeks society, he naturally crosses the river and goes among men of his own race."

"Yes, I see."

"And from that fact, I presume this loose talk has arisen," the money-lender remarked, evidently anxious to find an explanation.

"Undoubtedly! There is quite a hostile feeling among some of these Texans against all Mexicans," the Lone Hand observed. "And the fact that the rancher was a Mexican, and rather kept away from the Pedroville folks, was quite enough to make some of them think he was bad enough to be a member of this band of outlaws."

"Yes, that is the only reasonable explanation, for it must be all pure guesswork. You see, even if he was a member of any such band it

would clearly be an impossibility for the citizens of Pedroville to know anything about it."

"Certainly, it would not be possible, and my man was clearly guessing at the truth."

"Yes, but the fellow was a scoundrel to say such a thing without having any evidence to warrant the assertion," the money-lender declared, but his mind was evidently relieved by the explanation.

No more was said upon the subject, and the pair conversed upon different matters until they came in sight of the ranch.

It was isolated, being situated on a narrow trail which branched off from the main road, and there was not another ranch on the trail.

The Lone Hand noticed this of course, but he made no remark on the subject, but the thought came to him that, notwithstanding the boasts of the ranger captain that he had examined every foot of ground for forty miles around Pedroville here was a ranch which had escaped his search.

The Lone Hand felt satisfied there was little doubt of this, for he, in his shooting expedition, had scoured the country thoroughly and yet had not discovered this isolated ranch.

The estate was in a valley, through which ran a small stream.

The surface of the valley was broken and irregular, and dotted here and there with clumps of timber.

When the riders came within a thousand yards of the ranch, the money-lender suggested a halt so they would have a good opportunity to survey the estate.

But hardly had they drawn rein when a most unpleasant surprise took place.

Forth from the shelter of the timber clumps, where they had been hidden, sprung the outlaws who called themselves the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande.

There were nine of them all told, Captain Vermilion at the head.

The Lone Hand was in a trap, for he and his companion were completely surrounded by the outlaws.

The money-lender wrung his hands, as though terribly frightened.

"Oh, merciful heavens!" he cried, "we are in the hands of the outlaws!"

"Come, come now!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, "you have no cause to be alarmed. Your pals will not hurt you, and you cannot pull the wool over my eyes, for I knew you were going to lead me into a trap when we started!"

The Lone Hand presented a bold front, for he had been prepared for this attack, and had his revolvers out the moment the outlaws appeared.

"Ride on now and get out of the way, or I will put a bullet through you!" the Lone Hand continued, sternly.

The money-lender did not wait for a second command, but obeyed the order.

The outlaws were a hundred feet distant, just within revolver range, so they could plainly hear what the man-hunter said, and understood that he intended to fight.

"Well, you are in a tight place Mister Hand!" the outlaw chief said, mockingly.

"I have been in a tighter one and lived to tell of my escape from it!" the Arkansian replied.

"You will not live to tell of your escape from this one though!" Captain Vermilion cried.

"Don't you be too sure of that!" was the answer.

"Why, it is folly for you to think that you can contend with us; we are nine to one!" the outlaw leader declared.

"You are in a trap! With all your cunning you have been ensnared and now we will make an end of you; your fate will be a warning that the man who dares to attempt to measure strength with the Red Glove Raiders of the Rio Grande takes his life in his hand!"

"Really, you fellows are not doing me justice," the Lone Hand remarked. "You don't suppose I was stupid enough to be deceived by this shallow trick? Oh, no, I suspected what the game was the moment you began to play, and set my wits to work in order to turn the tables on you."

"You have sprung a surprise on me and now I will give you one."

"Come on, Pedroville!"

Clear as the blast of the clarion's note rung the voice of the Lone Hand out on the air, and, in obedience to the call, twenty well-armed Pedrovillians made their appearance from their hiding-places in the adjacent foot-hills.

The Lone Hand put spurs to his horse, the steed bounded forward, the rider blazing away with his revolvers.

Then came a brief, but bloody battle; the outlaws with their revolvers however were placed at a terrible disadvantage when opposed to the double-barreled shot-guns and rifles of the Pedroville men, besides being outnumbered.

They fought with the courage of bull-dogs until their leader and two-thirds of their number were slain, and then the rest threw down their arms and surrendered.

The outlaw chief was stone dead, a rifle-ball had pierced his heart.

When the mask was removed, the face of Maurice Moreno was exposed to view.

This was a surprise to all but the Lone Hand, who had suspected it for quite a time.

The outlaw band was destroyed and our tale is told.

A few more words and our task is ended.

The money-lender was advised to settle up his affairs and depart as soon as possible, and a similar warning was given by the Lone Hand to the landlord and the storekeeper, and though both attempted to bluster, yet they obeyed the warning.

And now that his object was accomplished the Lone Hand departed, much to the grief of the sprightly Cordelia Hamilton, but she bore up under the affliction well and comforted herself with the thought that the wheel of time might bring them together again, for, as she confided to her friend, Mercedes, when the news of her engagement to the Bostonian was made public:

"He is the only man I shall ever love."

Whether the girl's wish will ever be gratified or not the future alone can tell, but one thing is sure, no woman since he lost his heart's idol has ever made more impression than the dashing Cordelia upon the Lone Hand.

THE END.

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